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## ARTICLE

# Blood on the Tracks: Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, and (Un)Popular Music from Britney to Black Metal

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This article explores Pynchon's allusions to popular (and unpopular) music in *Bleeding Edge* (2013). I argue that Pynchon's engagement with music can not only be understood in terms of its periodizing function but also as an intricate practice of historical and prophetic/proleptic layering. This practice compellingly highlights some of the ways in which music is both uniquely subversive and uniquely vulnerable to co-optation. In doing so, Pynchon's fiction resonates with much-debated critiques of popular music by theorists such as Attali and Adorno, while at the same time significantly departing from them. The analysis ranges across the novel's sonic extremes, from the inescapable mega-hits of Britney Spears to the infamous Norwegian black metal scene. It uses a strategically-chosen selection of tracks as ports of entry into the "musical unconscious" (Julius Greve and Sascha Pöhlmann's term). Combining immersive close work on *Bleeding Edge* with extended discussions of the musical worlds beyond the novel's immediate parameters, the article ultimately moves towards a more expansive thesis: Music, I contend, can tell us as much about Pynchon as Pynchon does about music.

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The noises of a society are in advance of its images and material conflicts.  
Our music foretells the future. Let us lend it an ear.

— Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*.<sup>1</sup>

[T]here is [...] a limit, I think, to how far you can go. There is a point where you flip over. The energy has a peak. It's sharp like a blade.

— Attila Csihar, vocalist in Mayhem, interview in *Noisey*.<sup>2</sup>

But to lose all my senses/That is just so typically me....

— Britney Spears, "Oops! ... I Did It Again."<sup>3</sup>

## I. Introduction

In May 2018, *Orbit* published "The Pynchon Playlist". Compiled by Christian Hänggi, this remarkable undertaking catalogues all 927 of the "identifiable reference[s] to non-fictional musicians and works of music in Pynchon's eight novels, one short story collection, and his uncollected articles, essays, endorsements, and liner notes".<sup>4</sup> It is accompanied by statistical analysis of factors such as density, frequency, and genre distribution. There is surely no other living author who has engaged so resolutely with music. While none of Pynchon's works could be described as "about" music in any sort of direct sense — here I duly acknowledge the simultaneously wise and stupid dictum that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture"<sup>5</sup> — they nonetheless feature extensive ruminations on musical history and theory, on the lived experiences of brilliant and jobbing musicians, on the symbolic and technical particularities of instruments such as the saxophone, the harmonica, the ukulele,

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (1977; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 11.

<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Dick, "What is Extremity? A Conversation with Mayhem's Attila Csihar", *Noisey*, June 21, 2014. [https://noisey.vice.com/en\\_au/article/69453r/mayhem-esoteric-warfare-attila-csihar-interview](https://noisey.vice.com/en_au/article/69453r/mayhem-esoteric-warfare-attila-csihar-interview).

<sup>3</sup> Britney Spears, "Oops! ... I Did It Again," track 1 on *Oops! ... I Did It Again*, Jive Records, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Hänggi, "The Pynchon Playlist: A Catalog and Its Analysis", *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 6, no. 1 (2018): 2. <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.4872>.

<sup>5</sup> This witticism has been misattributed to figures ranging from Frank Zappa to Elvis Costello. According to *Quote Investigator*, articles from 1979 in *The Detroit Free Press* and *Time Barrier Express* indicate that it was first popularized (if not definitively coined) by Martin Mull, a US comedian, actor, and musician. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/11/08/writing-about-music/>.

and the kazoo. They are saturated with allusions to musical forms ranging from hymns to opera to psychedelic rock. As Hänggi explains, it is also significant that “[w]ith the exception of deriding Andrew Lloyd Webber [...], virtually no musician or form of music is portrayed or referenced in a condescending manner, no matter how ‘high’ or ‘low.’”<sup>6</sup> This does not mean, however, that Pynchon’s treatment of music can be reduced to a none-more-zany, postmodern free-for-all. Rather, his musical pluralism might be usefully thought of in relation to, say, the long resonances of Adorno’s claim that “the concept of taste [...] is outmoded”, even if the latter’s radically pessimistic take on popular music does not present itself as a natural jive partner in a contemporary context.<sup>7</sup> In addition, it is uncontroversial to assert that Pynchon frequently demonstrates an acute awareness of the ways music is intertwined with ideology, fetish, myth, and visions of social (dis)order. The exchange between Säure and Gustav about the respective merits of Beethoven and Rossini in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), played out amidst the still-smoking ruins of postwar Berlin, is perhaps the most cited illustration of this.<sup>8</sup> There is also clear evidence of a deep interest in

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<sup>6</sup> Hänggi, “Playlist”, 19. Another important exception to this rule is Muzak (although this does not imply that Pynchon’s broadly negative allusions to so-called “canned” or “elevator” music is an entirely straightforward matter). The fullest treatment of Muzak in Pynchon can be found in Justin St. Clair’s *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature: Novel Listening* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 120–47. St. Clair persuasively identifies a “heterophonic tendency [shared by a number of postmodern novelists] to decry a competing technology even as it formally enriches his own literary project”, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938), trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 288. For an overview of the complexities and controversies that surround Adorno’s approach to jazz, in particular, see Robert W. Witkin, “Why did Adorno ‘Hate’ Jazz?”, *Sociological Theory* 18, no. 1 (2000): 145–70. For a discussion of the various ways Adorno’s unforgiving take on popular music can be (dialectically) contextualized and defended from outright dismissal, see Max Paddison, “The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music”, *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 201–18. Ben Watson’s *Militant Esthetix* blog also features a surprising and compelling reading of the “punk” aspects of Adorno. See <http://www.militantesthetix.co.uk/adorno/twaprimer.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Gustav Schlabone celebrates Beethoven as a representative of “the German dialectic, the incorporation of more and more notes into the scale, culminating in dodecaphonic democracy.” Säure Bummer, perhaps mindful of the fact that the Ninth Symphony was a favourite of Hitler’s, proclaims that “All you feel like listening to Beethoven is going out and invading Poland. Ode to Joy indeed.” He argues passionately for Rossini: “[T]he whole point is that lovers always get together, isolation is overcome, and like it or not that is the one great centripetal movement of the World. Through the machineries of greed, pettiness, and the abuse of power, love occurs.” See Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973;

the transgressive and/or countercultural potential of musical expression, as well as in the perils of selling out to the proverbial “Man”. More broadly, I would suggest from the outset that a kind of primordial tension rumbles beneath the surface of Pynchon’s prose — between music, in Adorno’s terms, as “the immediate manifestation of impulse” and music as “the locus of its taming.”<sup>9</sup> Music in Pynchon can thus be understood (contra Nietzsche) as both Dionysian and Apollonian. It is “intoxicating” and “moderating”, revelatory and reified.<sup>10</sup>

As John Joseph Hess remarks in a (pre-“Playlist”) article on *Mason & Dixon* (1997), “to emphasize the importance of music to Pynchon’s fiction is to risk stating the obvious”. The word “music”, he points out, appears on over 300 occasions. At the same time, however, it highlights the “paradoxically under-examined” and “strangely under-theorized”. There is, nevertheless, a “diverse and growing body of critical attention” in this area, and Hess duly acknowledges the contributions of a range of scholars.<sup>11</sup> With few exceptions, much of this critical effort has focused on Pynchon’s canonical works from the sixties and seventies. There is also a strong emphasis on the structural and thematic significance of classical music (using that generic marker in its most

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London and New York: Vintage, 1995), 440.

<sup>9</sup> Adorno, “Fetish”, 288.

<sup>10</sup> See Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 403. Berger reads the opening claims of Adorno’s “Fetish” as a critique of Nietzsche, and I have adopted the terminology he employs to explain the distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian — two of the foundational categories used to conceptualize music per se and (at least implicitly) its socio-political and psychical functioning. Although Berger identifies a shared “intuition” behind Adorno and Nietzsche’s “critique of Wagnerian decadence”, the former “revises *The Birth of Tragedy*” “[i]n one brilliant move” by insisting on a kind of simultaneity between “expressive detail” (Dionysian) and “large form” or “structure” (Apollonian).

<sup>11</sup> John Joseph Hess, “Music in Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*”, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 2, no. 2 (2014): 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v2.2.75>. Hess usefully glosses the contributions of scholars such as: David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); J. O. Tate, “Gravity’s Rainbow: The Original Soundtrack”, *Pynchon Notes* 13 (1983), 3–24, <http://doi.org/10.16995/pn.407>; Kathryn Hume and Thomas J. Knight, “Pynchon’s Orchestration of *Gravity’s Rainbow*”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85, no. 3 (1986): 366–85; Carmen Pérez-Llantada Auría, “Beyond Linguistic Barriers: The Musical Fugue Structure of Thomas Pynchon’s ‘Entropy’”, *Cuadernos de Investigación Filológica* 17, no. 1–2 (1991): 127–40; Charles Clerc, *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000); and Thomas Schaub, “Atonalism, Nietzsche and *Gravity’s Rainbow*: Pynchon’s Use of German Music History and Culture,” *Pynchon Notes* 54–55 (2008): 26–38, <http://doi.org/10.16995/pn.23>.

elastic sense), alongside Pynchon's own ditties (which can be thought of variously as periodizing, choric, and disruptive).<sup>12</sup> *Gravity's Rainbow* is the most-discussed text by some distance. The novel has been described by J. O. Tate as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* "of Wagnerian ambition, association, and accomplishment" that ultimately "savages" the *völkisch*, all-conquering mania of precisely such an enterprise.<sup>13</sup> For Kathryn Hume and Thomas J. Knight, "[m]usic proves to be so important to the novel that it creates the dimensions of its own loci of activity, its own metaphoric universe". It bridges "the abyss" between the novel's multiple realities, from the "quotidian" to the "supranatural", and it serves as a "vehicle for prophecy" by "projecting diachronically into the future".<sup>14</sup> Besides the contribution of Hess, which teases out some compelling links between references to Plato in *Mason & Dixon* and a wider concern with forms of musical and civic harmony after American independence,<sup>15</sup> this overview can now be supplemented with the more recent work of Anahita Rouyan and Sean Carswell. The former illuminates the unique "audionarratological" qualities of *Gravity's Rainbow* and the special value attributed to "vocal performance", while the latter explores the layered, politicized meanings of the ukulele (an instrument that appears in all eight novels).<sup>16</sup> Hänggi's 2017 doctoral thesis on "Pynchon's Sonic Fiction" will, one hopes, become the first monograph on the subject.<sup>17</sup> Although Pynchon scholarship has not yet fully addressed some of the intellectual currents that inform contemporary

<sup>12</sup> Hess, building on the work of Clerc, suggests that "Pynchon's lyrics might [in some cases] be considered as a sort of Brechtian 'alienation effect'", 3. Given Hess's focus on *Mason & Dixon*, this point is strengthened by the novel's references to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), which was adapted by Brecht as *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928.

<sup>13</sup> Tate, "Original Soundtrack", 4.

<sup>14</sup> Hume and Knight, "Pynchon's Orchestration", 367.

<sup>15</sup> See Hess, "Music", esp. 7–17.

<sup>16</sup> Anahita Rouyan, "Singing Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: Interfaces of Song, Narrative, and Sonic Performance", *Partial Answers: A Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 15, no. 1 (2017): 117–33; Sean Carswell, "Thomas Pynchon's Ukulele", *The Journal of American Culture* 38, no. 3 (2015): 205–17. Carswell is also the author of *The Metaphysical Ukulele* (New York: Ig Publishing, 2016), a short story collection that alludes to Pynchon.

<sup>17</sup> Christian Hänggi, "Pynchon's Sonic Fiction", Doctoral Thesis, University of Basel, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (2017). Currently restricted to repository until June 1, 2022. All quotations from the unpublished thesis are included with the permission of the author. <https://edoc.unibas.ch/56240/>.

approaches to the relationship between literature and music, the ongoing conversation here is clearly a rich one.<sup>18</sup>

Building on these foundations, this analysis explores the soundscapes of *Bleeding Edge* (2013). It is primarily concerned with the allusions to popular (and in some respects *unpopular*) music from the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It argues that there is a distinct creative relationship between Pynchon's treatment of music in this novel — which begins in the spring of 2001 and finishes around the same time the following year, the shockwaves of 9/11 still reverberating — and his expansive, networked take on what it means to live at the bleeding edge of history and technology. Writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Michael Jarvis contrasts the cyberpunk fiction of William Gibson with Pynchon's "historical novel" — stuffed as it is with "the signifiers of Gen-Y media saturation" — in order to argue that while Gibson can be read as a chronicler of an "unevenly distributed future" that we already inhabit, Pynchon's text "demonstrates how quickly the present becomes the unremembered past".<sup>19</sup> It is my contention, however, that music in *Bleeding Edge* contributes to an altogether more intricate and interesting practice of historical layering, while also pointing towards the known and unknown futures beyond the novel's present time. Exploring the novel's musical references therefore helps to establish a unique way of "hearing double", of "listening" to its complex then/now dynamics. Stumbling across millennial chart-toppers such as Nelly's "Ride Wit Me" or Semisonic's "Closing Time" might well induce what Jarvis calls an "incredulous realization" (at least for readers belonging to certain demographics) that the times, as it were, are not just a-changin' but already thoroughly transformed.<sup>20</sup> Yet there are

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<sup>18</sup> Though beyond the scope of this analysis, an extended exploration of the relationship between post-modern/contemporary fiction and the development of what Stephen Benson calls the "culturalist" turn "in the theory and practice of musicology" potentially opens up new ways of engaging with the US novel's relationship to non-literary academic practices and institutions. See *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 3. Also note intriguing theoretical debates about the extent to which "the resistance to signification once embodied by music" now stands for "an inextricable part of signification itself". See Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), xii.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Jarvis, "Pynchon's Deep Web", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 10, 2013. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/pynchons-deep-web/>.

<sup>20</sup> Nelly ft. City Spud, "Ride Wit Me", track 7 on *Country Grammar*, Universal Records, 2000; Semisonic,



deeper processes in play here, already hinted at by Hume and Knight's claim about the "metaphoric universe" of music and its "diachronic" pulsing in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Jacques Attali's *Noise* (1977), for instance, one of the most influential and audacious accounts of "the political economy of music", consistently stresses the ways music functions as a "herald of the future":

[S]tyles and economic organization of music are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself on the order of things.<sup>21</sup>

As Steven Shaviro notes, *Noise* was of course written "before the Walkman, let alone the iPod," and the prophetic/utopian elements of Attali's own theory — particularly the notion that "[a]s the consumption of music (and of images) becomes ever more privatized and solipsistic" it will "mutate into a practice of freedom" — can appear naïve when measured against, say, the "retromania" diagnosed by Simon Reynolds.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the "profound mutation, delocalized and diffuse, that fundamentally changes the code of social reproduction" imagined by Attali,<sup>23</sup> the dominant forms of contemporary popular culture, argues Reynolds, are driven by cutting (and indeed bleeding) edge digital technology but find themselves perversely unable to innovate. The twenty-first century, he polemically claims, is under the sign of the prefix "re" — "revivals, reissues, remakes, re-enactments." The radical promise of the digital age is ever more difficult to perceive vis-à-vis the mesmeric, endless rearrangement and consumption of the recent past (specifically the past that still belongs to "living memory").<sup>24</sup>

There are certainly moments in *Bleeding Edge* that appear to dramatize some of what Reynolds is articulating here, most obviously via the lavish tech sector party

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"Closing Time", track 1 on *Feeling Strangely Fine*, MCA, 1998; Jarvis, "Deep Web."

<sup>21</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Shaviro, "Attali's *Noise*", *The Pinocchio Theory* (blog), April 15, 2005. <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=397>.

<sup>23</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), xi, xiv, emphasis in original.

held at Tworkeffx, a SoHo nightclub. The official theme of the event is “1999”, with “a darker subtext of Denial.” A long descriptive sequence with echoes of F. Scott Fitzgerald details how the crowd of webheads take part in a “consensual delusion” that “they’re still in the pre-crash fantasy” and dance “in the shadow of last year’s dreaded Y2K, now safely history.” The sound-system, “looted from a failed arena somewhere in Eastern Europe,” blasts the obligatory Prince track, alongside late-nineties tunes by the light college rock band Barenaked Ladies (presumably their droll yet saccharine single “It’s All Been Done” is the implied, doubly-ironized reference) and hip hop crew Bone Thugs-N-Harmony (notable for advancing Gangsta rap by incorporating aspects of spiritual inquiry associated with soul and gospel, and whose bestselling album is entitled *E. 1999 Eternal*).<sup>25</sup> “[F]auxhawks” and “Matrix-era Ray-Bans” are sported (the fact that the Wachowskis’ film features a hollowed-out copy of Baudrillard’s *Simulations* enhances the vertiginous looping); video screens display Monica Lewinsky’s appearance on *Saturday Night Live* and the first season of Nickelodeon’s *SpongeBob SquarePants*. This, Pynchon writes, is “[w]hat passes for nostalgia in a time of widespread Attention Deficit Disorder.”<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, Attali’s emphasis on the inherent “futurity” of music, as well as his insistence that music is a privileged site where “mutations first occur”,<sup>27</sup> uniquely vulnerable to co-optation yet uniquely insubordinate, helps to complicate a straightforward reading of *Bleeding Edge* in which the musical allusions are simply period details that do no more than communicate how rapidly the “now” becomes “then”. It also points to how the role of music in the novel cannot be exclusively conceived of in terms of some neoliberal Ouroboros — the inane gurglings of popular culture eating itself — or explained away via sweeping declarations about gentrification, infantilisation, tech-mediated nostalgia, and so on. With both the historicity and futurity of

<sup>25</sup> Prince, “1999”, track 1 on *1999* (Warner Brothers, 1982); Barenaked Ladies, “It’s All Been Done”, track 2 on *Stunt* (Reprise, 1998); Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, *E. 1999 Eternal*, Ruthless Records, 1995. For a discussion of the spiritual aspects of Bone Thugs, see Daniel White Hodge, *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 73–76.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), 301–02. All subsequent references in parenthesis.

<sup>27</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 6.

music in mind, my analysis strategically ranges across *Bleeding Edge*'s sonic extremes, from the inescapable mega-hits of Britney Spears to the abject, gruesome aesthetics of black metal. These two reference points are paired in the novel with what appear to be vivid, more venerable contrasts (the Beach Boys and Frank Sinatra) and they represent the diversity as well as the interconnectedness of the novel's "heterophonic" playlist.<sup>28</sup> More specifically, they are used in the later sections of this project as ports of entry into a "musical unconscious", a term I borrow from Julius Greve and Sascha Pöhlmann's reflections on the "peculiar role" of music in American Studies.<sup>29</sup> Music, I contend, can tell us as much about Pynchon as Pynchon does about music, and giving this claim substance necessitates a combination of immersive close work with the novel itself and a more expansive treatment of the musical worlds beyond the immediate parameters of the text. Music reverberates, pulses, and echoes through individual and collective bodies, through the levels of the psyche, through the historical and contemporary layers of Pynchon's fiction. Exploring these layers and the wider contexts I have hinted at is therefore part of a critical process that lends an ear to Attali's (and Pynchon's) immensely suggestive yet never quite fully articulated conception of music's double quality, its simultaneous amenability and recalcitrance in the face of power.

## II. Swinging Detectives and Millennial Shifts

Like so many of Pynchon's novels, *Bleeding Edge* draws on the conventions of crime/detective narratives. Given the genre's enduring influence on Pynchon, an intriguing and relatively under-scrutinized set of literary-musical relationships emerges as part of the backdrop here. The multifarious interplay between crime writing and music stretches from Conan Doyle's Holmes, who famously owns a Stradi-

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<sup>28</sup> This term is borrowed from St. Clair, used throughout *Sound and Aural Media*, cited in n. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Julius Greve and Sascha Pöhlmann, "Introduction: What is the Musical Unconscious?," in *America and the Musical Unconscious* (New York and Dresden: Atropos Press, 2015), 9. The introduction to this edited collection outlines various ways of conceptualizing the musical unconscious — as an "excess of meaning", as a contextual reservoir, as "transtemporal" and "technological" motion, and as a factor in the construction of "imagined communities" (22, 25, 29, 36). Each of these notions comes to bear on the approach I have adopted here.

various violin and (rather less famously) is the author of a privately-circulated thesis on the “Polyphonic Motets of Lassus”, to the record company suits and wannabe pop stars of Elmore Leonard’s *Be Cool* (1999).<sup>30</sup> James Ellroy has conceptualised his neo-noir prose as an attempt to create his own version of the “big, thunderous music” he associates with Beethoven and Bruckner.<sup>31</sup> The significance of jazz and blues for Walter Mosely, both aesthetically and politically given his post 9/11 reflections on African American culture as a bulwark against US “economic domination” and militarism, is well established.<sup>32</sup> Donald E. Westlake, whose description of New York City as an “enigmatic suspect” provides the epigraph to *Bleeding Edge*, has (like Raymond Chandler and Pynchon himself) an unproduced libretto on his CV.<sup>33</sup> Music, in other words, has bled for a long while into the various modes of sleuthing and has nourished crime fiction’s defining thematic concern with broader kinds of harmony and dissonance. Analogies between musical connoisseurship and the processes of detection further contribute to the relationship, as does the way crime writing divides and spreads into distinct micro-genres and fan cultures (operating in tandem with what Jorge Luis Borges calls the “continual and delicate infraction of its rules”).<sup>34</sup> This diverse but tangible living tradition provides a broad framework for thinking about Pynchon’s connection to music that is just as significant as any high-modernist poly-

<sup>30</sup> See Arthur Conan Doyle, “His Last Bow,” in *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Leslie S. Klinger (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 1328. Leonard was also a jazz devotee who conceptualised his prose in terms of “swing[ing] with it.” See Charles J. Rzepka, *Being Cool: The Work of Elmore Leonard* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 22–23.

<sup>31</sup> See Timothy Mangan, “Crime Novelist James Ellroy: Beethoven Fanatic”, *The Orange County Register*, September 3, 2003. <https://www.ocregister.com/2009/09/03/crime-novelist-james-ellroy-beethoven-fanatic/>.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Mosely, *What Next: A Memoir Toward World Peace* (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 2003), 139.

<sup>33</sup> As Steven Weisenburger explains, Pynchon applied to the Ford Foundation after graduating from Cornell in 1959, specifically responding to a scheme that facilitated collaboration between literary writers and repertoire companies. See “Thomas Pynchon at Twenty-Two: A Recovered Autobiographical Sketch”, *American Literature* 62, no. 4 (1990), 692–97. In addition to this, an unfinished draft of *Minstrel Island*, a kind of science-fiction operetta co-authored with Kirkpatrick Sale, is held in the Pynchon collection at the Harry Ransom Center. For details about Kim Cooper’s discovery of the libretto written by Raymond Chandler, see the *Goblin Wine* project: <http://www.goblinwine.com/p/story.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Richard Hull, *Excellent Intentions*” (1938), trans. Eliot Weinberger, in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin, 1999), 184.

mathery. What, however, is really under investigation in *Bleeding Edge*, and what are the more particular contexts for its soundscapes?

The novel begins with a low-key attempt to probe the suspect diversion of funds from a shadowy Internet start-up firm called hashslingrz to an even more suspect company, Darklinear Solutions. However, the “centrifugal” energy that defines Pynchon’s associative, paranoid style — his habit of working through “a string of citations” is notably likened to John Coltrane’s soloing technique by Jonathan Lethem — cannot be held back for long.<sup>35</sup> The case quickly develops into an elaborate network of strange and dubious transactions, all seemingly tied in some way to the villainous dotcom entrepreneur Gabriel Ice. The woman charged with playing the heroic detective is the de-certified fraud investigator Maxine Tarnow — a Jewish New Yorker, resident of the “Yupper West Side” of Manhattan, and doting mother of two (166). As Maxine negotiates a series of increasingly difficult challenges, she is obliged to become conscious of the costs — economic, emotional, and ethical — that she and others are incurring, and must strike a precarious balance between her desires, her responsibility to her family, her principles, and the quest for definitive answers. Woven into her investigation are possible connections to 9/11 (Pynchon strategically flirting here with aspects of trutherism), the CIA’s history of clandestine support for repressive regimes during the Cold War, a “virtual sanctuary” known as DeepArcher (74), and the legends of the so-called Montauk Project (an alleged series of secret government experiments conducted at a military installation on Long Island involving psychological warfare techniques and even, it has been suggested, research into time travel). The “case”, therefore, can be understood as an investigation of a whole world — a world that has been shaken by some immediate varieties of trauma (the bursting of the dotcom bubble and the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon) but also subject to the lingering influences and legacies of deeper, older forms of what Pynchon calls “Republican sin”, of struggles supposedly left behind after the much-trumpeted End of History (191).

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<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Lethem, “Pynchonopolis”, *The New York Times Book Review*, September 15, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/books/review/bleeding-edge-by-thomas-pynchon.html>.

With a specific focus on music in mind, and indeed the pervasive emphasis in crime fiction on grey areas of the law, we should note that *Bleeding Edge* is set just after a landmark court case that began in May 2000. Metallica, soon followed by hip hop impresario Dr. Dre, became the first recording artists to sue Napster, the peer-to-peer file sharing service, for copyright infringement and racketeering. Napster was founded by Shawn Fanning and Sean Parker in 1999. Both were still teenagers, armed only with Dell notebooks. Their journey from the margins to the mainstream invites a series of parallels with the eccentric cast of “wired” characters — online anarchists and corporate sharks — that populate *Bleeding Edge*. The Napster source code written by Fanning combined “the instant-messaging system of Internet Relay, the file-sharing functions of Microsoft Windows, and the advanced [...] filtering capabilities of various search engines.”<sup>36</sup> It quickly mutated from a beta program used by tech-savvy students at Northeastern University to an unprecedented economic and existential challenge to the music industry as it then was — noting here that *Bleeding Edge*’s “widely coveted yet ill-defined DeepArcher application” designed by Justin and Lucas offers “an invisible self-recoding pathway” into untraceable virtual space, where radical new forms of freedom and exchange, alongside previously undreamt of “Neolib mischief”, may become possible (67, 79, 411). Napster, as Greg Kot explains, played a central role in turning the downloading of MP3s, once “a relatively esoteric pursuit”, into a global, everyday practice.<sup>37</sup>

After a general suit was filed by the Recording Industry Association of America, Metallica’s decision to sue generated enormous publicity — compounded by an infamous stunt pulled by the band’s outspoken drummer Lars Ulrich, who appeared on the front steps of Napster’s San Mateo headquarters alongside a pick-up truck loaded with box files containing the “names of hundreds of thousands of [...] users who were making Metallica songs available on the Internet.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast to artists such as the Beastie Boys, one of the first major groups to make their music freely available via

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<sup>36</sup> Karl Taro Greenfield, “Meet the Napster”, *Time*, October 2, 2000. Archived by CNN here: <http://edition.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/time/2000/10/02/napster.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Greg Kot, *Ripped: How the Wired Generation Revolutionized Music* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 25.

<sup>38</sup> Kot, *Ripped*, 33.

their own website, Metallica's stance provoked a significant blowback from fans and cultural commentators, with many dismayed by the spectacle of arena-filling millionaires taking on a company at that point associated with a youthful, dynamic kind of cyber-geek utopianism.<sup>39</sup> If a new form of theft was the charge levelled against Napster, hypocrisy and greed were the rather more time-honoured accusations made against a band that had cut their teeth in the 80s Bay Area thrash metal scene, a beer-and-sweat-drenched era of underground tape-trading, live-show bootlegging, the DIY reproduction of logos, and so on. Ulrich's rhetoric in defending the band's legal action, however, invoked a high-minded opposition to "art being traded like a commodity", later supplemented by a kind of anti-establishment machismo in describing the whole episode as a territorial "street fight" about "control".<sup>40</sup> Sean Parker, arrested for hacking by the FBI aged 15, is now on the *Forbes* billionaire list, having served as the first president of Facebook, and is a major investor in Spotify (as the regulation of digital music continues to evolve in the era of algorithmic data-mining). Dr. Dre, who proclaims himself "the same O. G." in a fiery musical riposte to critics and haters, "mad at me 'cause I can finally afford to provide", has also left a significant mark on the consumption of digital music by lending his braggadocious cred to the Beats Electronics range of headphones and speakers, and an early streaming service (both now absorbed by Apple).<sup>41</sup>

As Hänggi notes, *Bleeding Edge* has "the longest playlist of Pynchon's novels in relative terms (i.e., per word) and is second only to *Gravity's Rainbow* in absolute terms".<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See Eric Smialek, "The Unforgiven: A Reception Study of Metallica Fans and 'Sell Out' Accusations", in *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies*, ed. Andy R. Brown, Karl Spracklen, Keith Kahn-Harris, and Niall Scott (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 106–24; also see Kot, 33–34.

<sup>40</sup> Jaan Uhelszki, "Metallica Sue Napster for Copyright Infringement", *Rolling Stone*, April 13, 2000. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/metallica-sue-napster-for-copyright-infringement-182239/>; Dave Lee, "Spotify: Metallica ends Napster Feud with New Deal", *BBC News*, December 6, 2012. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-20634944>.

<sup>41</sup> Dr. Dre ft. Eminem, "Forgot About Dre", track 10 on *2001*, Aftermath/Interscope Records, 1999. On hip hop, enterprise, and industry, see Zack O'Malley Greenburg, *3 Kings: Diddy, Dr. Dre, Jay-Z, and Hip-Hop's Multibillion-Dollar Rise* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Hänggi, "Sonic Fiction", 138. It is also noted, however, that the novel "contains the fewest songs composed by Pynchon, the fewest Pynchon songs sung by the novel's characters, and the highest count of canned music playing".

The very notion of the “playlist” as it is currently understood, of course, emerges from the digital transformations that frame, and flow through, this novel. The context outlined above also helps to reveal some of the logic behind Pynchon’s engagement with genres such as metal and hip hop for the first time in his career. While neither Metallica nor Dr. Dre is alluded to directly, some of Pynchon’s more eyebrow-raising excursions into these musical terrains will be explored in the latter stages of this analysis. Napster is namechecked in *Bleeding Edge*, though, by Reg Despard, the documentary-maker whose initial visit to the “Tail ‘Em and Nail ‘Em” agency sets the whole case in motion. “Someday there’ll be a Napster for videos,” he later tells Maxine, and “it’ll be routine to post anything and share it with anybody”, to which she responds by asking “How could anybody make money doing that?” (348–49). Jarvis interprets Reg’s foresight here as “a complex joke” — YouTube is “thriving” (bought by Google for \$1.65 billion in 2006 and now just as crucial to the integrated dissemination and archiving of music as it is to recorded images), while “Napster [...] has long been relegated to a historical footnote.”<sup>43</sup>

This reading is undoubtedly persuasive on one level. However, it rather understates the game-changing significance of Napster (which in its most recent, paid-for incarnation actually released a playlist of Pynchon-inspired music to celebrate the publication of *Bleeding Edge*)<sup>44</sup> and does not acknowledge the complex ways digital technology actively reconfigures the cultural interplay between past, present, and future. The broader point then is that the musical allusions and performances in *Bleeding Edge* are both the product of and a reflection on the unprecedented availability of recorded music in the twenty-first century. The novel’s playlist is at the very least implicitly tied to major changes in listening habits, in the attribution of value to music, in the rights and status of music-makers, in the creation and dissolution of musical subcultures, in relations between music and the world of physical objects (or “meatspace” in the novel’s own lexicon). This is not to suggest that Pynchon succumbs to the hyperbolic “digital exceptionalism” identified by Bruce Epperson, who criticizes accounts of Napster that appear oblivious to the history

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<sup>43</sup> Jarvis, “Deep Web.”

<sup>44</sup> See <https://us.napster.com/blog/post/thomas-pynchon-and-pop-music>.



of intellectual property law and previous “experiments in shareware” such as the radio.<sup>45</sup> As I have already hinted, musical allusion in the novel actively contributes to a process of historical layering. The impact of these millennial shifts, however, remains undeniably profound.

If the rise of Napster has been summarized in terms such as “The Day the Music was Set Free”, the novel’s backdrop also includes “The Day the Music Died”.<sup>46</sup> This second phrase was the headline lifted from the well-known lyrics of Don McLean’s “American Pie” by the *San Francisco Chronicle* to summarise Woodstock ’99 — “one of the biggest debacles in concert history”, according to Jane Ganahl, the author of the column, and another intersection of sorts between music and criminality.<sup>47</sup> Following on from a 25<sup>th</sup>-anniversary festival in ’94 that passed largely without incident, this hyper-commodified, MTV-backed revival of the legendary “Aquarian exposition”, as the 1969 event was billed, ended up paralleling Altamont (the original Woodstock’s dark double) as a kind of shorthand for the bitter end of a decade. The peace and love evoked by the iconic image of a dove resting on the neck of a guitar was supplanted by infrastructural chaos (MTV’s Kurt Loder described the scene as “like a concentration camp”), and numerous instances of sexual assault, fighting, and vandalism.<sup>48</sup> A performance by the nü-metal act Limp Bizkit, who received \$1.8 million from Napster to fund a free concert tour that same summer, is especially notorious. Responding to an earnest attempt by Alanis Morissette to pacify an agitated crowd, frontman Fred Durst (**Figure 1**) made the following proclamation: “I don’t think you should mellow out. This is 1999, motherfuckers. Stick those

<sup>45</sup> Bruce Epperson, review of *Digital Phoenix: Why the Information Economy Collapsed and How It Will Rise Again* by Bruce Abramson (2005), *Technology and Culture* 47, no. 3 (2006), 684.

<sup>46</sup> Tom Lamont, “The Day the Music was Set Free”, *The Observer*, February 24, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/feb/24/napster-music-free-file-sharing>.

<sup>47</sup> Jane Ganahl, “Woodstock ’99: The Day the Music Died”, *SFGate*, July 28, 1999. <https://www.sfgate.com/style/article/Woodstock-99-The-day-the-music-died-3073934.php>.

In Don MacLean’s song, the phrase “the day the music died” (now used in a variety of contexts) specifically refers to the death of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper in 1959. Track one on *American Pie*, United Artists Records, 1971.

<sup>48</sup> See James E. Perone, *Woodstock: An Encyclopedia of the Music and Art Fair* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 92.



**Figure 1:** Fred Durst addresses Woodstock, July 24, 1999 (official Limp Bizkit on Music Vault/YouTube).

Birkenstocks up your ass!”<sup>49</sup> Chaos ensued, including an alleged gang rape in the mosh pit, during a rendition of “Break Stuff”, their anthem to a generalized condition of obnoxious fury.<sup>50</sup> On the following day, the Red Hot Chili Peppers covered “Fire” by Jimi Hendrix and thus provided the live soundtrack to a series of arsons – a debased tribute to the artist who headlined Woodstock in ’69 with a “bravura deconstruction” of the “national hymn”.<sup>51</sup>

Woodstock ’99 was met with both conservative hectoring about the rotten core of US popular culture (the Ganahl piece sometimes verges on this) and melancholic, post-Nirvana lamentations about what Mark Fisher calls “the defeat and incorporation of rock’s utopian and promethean ambitions.”<sup>52</sup> In addition, a number

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Ganahl, “Woodstock ’99.”

<sup>50</sup> See Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan, *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 88. The song is track 4 on *Significant Other*, Interscope Records, 1999.

<sup>51</sup> Lauren Onkey, “Jimi Hendrix and the Politics of Race in the Sixties”, in *Imagine Nation: the American Counterculture of the 1960s and ’70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 189. The legendary guitarist is referenced twice in *Bleeding Edge*. Maxine’s African American secretary, Daytona, “paraphrasing Jimi Hendrix,” exclaims “mayonnaise!” during comic dialogue about whiteness (21), and there is a later allusion to “Motor City psychobilly” artist Elvis Hitler, whose song “Green Haze” combines the tune of Hendrix’s “Purple Haze” with the lyrics of the TV show *Green Acres* theme (177). Track 8 on *Disgraceland*, Wanghead Records, 1987.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 10. Fisher is referring here to the death of Kurt Cobain, and I cite the phrase for its broader resonances.

of festivalgoers defended the implicated performers by claiming that much of the unrest was a reaction against Woodstock becoming “Commercialstock” — the result, in other words, of a failure to deliver on the promise of an “emancipative imaginary”, or the “semiotic and mythic burden” that music in this context is seemingly required to bear.<sup>53</sup> However, as Christopher Gair argues in an outstanding discussion of the documentary record of the 1969 festival, it is problematic to invoke the original Woodstock as some Edenic, unsullied idyll against which subsequent falls are measured. The event was, in itself, deeply marked by “the contradictions of the counterculture movement at the end of the 1960s”. It might not have “exploded into violence in the manner of Altamont” (or its late nineties corporate-backed sequel), but closely analyzing the remarkable footage compiled by Michael Wadleigh nonetheless exposes a “utopia/dystopia dialectic” that is far more nuanced than the widely mythologized narrative of “a community offering genuine alternatives to dominant American lifestyles”.<sup>54</sup> The vibes, as it were, are thoroughly mixed, not only due to the fabled brown acid.

Pynchon, of course, has engaged with the counterculture (and indeed with “alternatives” to America as it was and is) from the outset of his career. His fictions, as David Cowart puts it in an oft-cited formulation, “revolve in planetary orbits around the sunlike moral intensity of the 1960s”, and Joanna Freer’s recent book on the subject has elaborated on just how important the counterculture is in both contextualizing and conceptualizing his work.<sup>55</sup> Pynchon’s formative friendship with the late Richard Fariña also connects him to Joan Baez, who delivered one of the best-known sets at Woodstock (Fariña became Baez’s brother-in-law after marrying her younger sister, Mimi).<sup>56</sup> There is no doubt that the extraordinary period described in *Inherent*

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<sup>53</sup> Johnson and Cloonan, *Dark Side*, 90.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Gair, *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 205–06.

<sup>55</sup> David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 85; Joanna Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>56</sup> *Gravity’s Rainbow* is of course dedicated to Richard Fariña, who died in a motorcycle accident on Mimi’s 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in 1966. The couple actually recorded an acoustic folk instrumental entitled “V,” inspired by Pynchon’s first novel (track 6 on *Celebrations for a Grey Day*, Vanguard Records, 1965).

*Vice* (2009) as “this little parenthesis of light” continues to exert its intoxicating influence.<sup>57</sup> The *Bleeding Edge* playlist, moreover, features numerous references to artists from the Woodstock '99 milieu – it includes two, Jamiroquai and Moby,<sup>58</sup> who actually performed there – and also alludes to popular music which can be associated, as Hänggi astutely emphasizes, with US military interventions after 9/11. Easy listening, Middle-of-the-Road balladry, and themes from movies and television shows also feature heavily. It is therefore tempting to speculate that *Bleeding Edge* “may indicate [...] Pynchon’s hopes for resistance by means of making music as staged in his earlier novels have been disappointed”.<sup>59</sup> But just as Gair reads Wadleigh’s film of Woodstock as both a celebration and an exposé, any reader of Pynchon will know that utopian and/or subversive openings of all kinds – from the Zone in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to DeepArcher in *Bleeding Edge* – are invariably precarious, fragile, and embattled. An analysis of music in this most recent novel cannot rely on a one-dimensional sense of a more radical, innocent, or authentic past (both within and beyond the confines of his fiction). Pynchon is quite clearly alert to the hazards of nostalgia, and *Bleeding Edge* satirizes the digital acceleration of sentimental longing for times-gone-by via the Tworkeffex scene I have already mentioned. His own brand of “nostalgia” is, as James Berger argues in relation to *Vineland* (1990), a “nostalgia for the *future*, for possibilities of social harmony glimpsed at crucial moments in the past, but not ever yet realized.”<sup>60</sup>

In addition, the sanctimony that characterizes many reflections on Woodstock '99 is clearly not a promising basis for analyzing the role of musical allusion in *Bleeding Edge* or Pynchon’s relationship to music more generally. Impish remarks about “widespread Attention Deficit Disorder” aside, the novel again provides a

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 254.

<sup>58</sup> Specifically to “Canned Heat” and “Cosmic Girl” by the former and “That’s When I Reach For My Revolver” by the latter (221–22). Track 1 on *Synkronized*, Sony Soho2, 1999; track 2 on *Travelling Without Moving*, Sony Soho2, 1996; track 9 on *Animal Rights*, Mute/Elektra, 1996 (original version by Mission of Burma).

<sup>59</sup> Hänggi, “Sonic Fiction”, 138.

<sup>60</sup> James Berger, “Cultural Trauma and the ‘Timeless Burst’: Pynchon’s Revision of Nostalgia in *Vineland*”, *Postmodern Culture* 5, no. 3 (1995), my emphasis. <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.595/berger.595>.

pre-emptive set of critical parameters. When Vyrva confesses to Maxine that she has betrayed her husband, Justin (one of the duo behind DeepArcher), by having an affair with the reviled Gabriel Ice, their conversation unfolds tellingly:

‘Since Las Vegas last summer. We even got in a quickie on September 11<sup>th</sup>, which makes it that much worse...’

‘I hope you’re not saying you caused that somehow? That would be really crazy, Vyrva.’

‘Same kind of carelessness. Isn’t it?’

‘Same what what? Is this the listen-up-all-you-slackers speech? American neglect of family values brings al-Qaeda in on the airplanes and takes the Trade Center down? [...] Somehow I don’t see the cause and effect, but maybe it’s just me.’ (363–64)

The implications of Maxine’s response are far reaching, a part of what Cowart calls “a disgust at the authorities’ appropriation of terrible events” and a critique of both the insincere moralizing and the bullish patriotism that flourished in the wake of 9/11.<sup>61</sup> With popular music under scrutiny, the point becomes more specific. While the resonance might be purely coincidental, “Family Values” was the sardonic franchise name used for a series of hugely successful multi-artist tours established by the band Korn (also present at Woodstock ’99), featuring an assortment of controversy-generating acts from the worlds of metal, industrial, and hip hop. The tour’s brand name implicitly answers back to the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), an ascendant force in the regulation of music between 1985 and the mid-nineties,<sup>62</sup> and it began a third nationwide tour just a month after 9/11. Whatever one might think about the era of popular music that *Bleeding Edge* is mostly immersed in, to suggest a *causal* relationship between the supposed vapid-ity, vulgarity, or “carelessness” of millennial culture and tragic eruptions of political

<sup>61</sup> David Cowart, “Down on the Barroom Floor of History: Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge*,” *Postmodern Culture* 24, no. 1 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.2013.0060>.

<sup>62</sup> The PMRC was founded by the so-called “Washington Wives”: Tipper Gore, Susan Baker, Pam Howar, and Sally Nevius. A full transcript of the 1985 Senate hearing on “sexually explicit and offensive content” is archived here: <http://www.joesapt.net/superlink/shrg99-529/>.

violence is like blaming Marilyn Manson for Columbine. At the same time, though, the novel maintains a fierce stance against “the capitalist drive to commodify everything”<sup>63</sup> and toys with the role that popular music might play in feeding and facilitating a variety of dark impulses and power structures. Using the novel’s own allusions as routes into the “musical unconscious” will bring these claims to light, as well as point to a broader interpretive strategy that encompasses both reading and listening.

Nevertheless, for all the layers of qualification here, it is still legitimate to claim that *Bleeding Edge* attributes “affirmative” meanings to popular music. The novel welcomes musical expressions of whimsy, affection, anger, sorrow, comfort, and arousal in a way that many thinkers working in the post-Frankfurt School tradition would never countenance (Attali can be included here given his quasi-Adornian approach to commodified popular music, even if *Noise* ultimately climaxes with an eyebrow-raisingly flamboyant kind of utopianism). Pynchon, after all, is a novelist who once wrote that “rock and roll remains one of the last honorable callings”, in the liner notes for *Nobody’s Cool*, a 1996 album by the alt-guitar band Lotion, who once appeared in an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and had a track included on a compilation CD sold exclusively in Taco Bell restaurants.<sup>64</sup> Although it would be foolish to take this statement entirely at face value, the case for further investigation of the novel’s soundscapes is a compelling one.

### III. Catsuits & Jumpsuits

With my previous description of the novel’s sonic extremes in mind, it is appropriate that the very first allusion to music of any kind in *Bleeding Edge* represents one of the most prominent nodes in this network. It occurs when Pynchon details a past encounter at a Long Island warehouse between Maxine and Dwayne Z. “Dizzy”

<sup>63</sup> Sascha Pöhlmann, “‘I Just Look at Books’: Reading the Monetary Metareality of *Bleeding Edge*”, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 4, no. 1 (2016): 10. <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.189>.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Pynchon, CD liner notes for Lotion, *Nobody’s Cool*, Big Cat Records, 1995. The band played their song “Blind For Now” at the Bronze, the television show’s fictional nightclub, in “Phases”, directed by Bruce Seth Green, season 2, episode 15, 1998. The track “Tear” was featured on the compilation album *Do Something: Alternative*, Sony Music Special Products, 1994.

Cubitts, a “gizmo retailer” and “low-stakes hustler” with a persistent record of “inventory fraud”:

‘Dizzy, what.’

‘Oops, I did it again, as Britney always sez.’

‘Look at this,’ stomping up and down the aisles taking and lifting sealed cartons at random. A number of these, to somebody’s surprise maybe, not Maxine’s, seemed, though sealed, to have nothing inside. (7)

The reference here is to “Oops! ... I Did It Again” by Britney Spears, the lead single from the album of the same name released in 2000. The song was written and co-produced by Max Martin, a “sui generis” musician from Stockholm described as the “master hooksmith” of contemporary pop.<sup>65</sup> For better or worse (exposure to such music is not always a question of choice or even autonomy), Martin is a principal shaper of how the contemporary world *sounds* and has been identified as the main culprit behind the much maligned yet wildly successful formula known as the “millennial whoop”. This relatively early example of his hit-making craft, which quickly achieved a kind of inescapable ubiquity, holds the US record for the most additions to radio station rosters in a single day. It was accompanied by a kitsch, sci-fi inspired video that features Britney performing an elaborately choreographed dance routine in a red catsuit. The song itself is glossy, mid-tempo, bubblegum funk-pop in C sharp minor with a bona-fide “earworm” chorus.<sup>66</sup> The fact that it has wormed its way, as it were, into Dizzy’s everyday speech — the outcome of complex interactions between neurology, cultural dissemination systems, and capitalist marketing strategies — is clear enough testament to this. A faint sense of knowing eccentricity emerges in the bridge of the track via a spoken word segment that refers to the characters of Rose and Jack in James Cameron’s similarly ubiquitous *Titanic* (1997). Intriguingly, a

<sup>65</sup> John Seabrook, “Blank Space: What Kind of Genius is Max Martin?”, *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/blank-space-what-kind-of-genius-is-max-martin>.

<sup>66</sup> On the neurology of the “ear worm”, see Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, revised edition (2007; London: Picador Classic, 2018), 44–53.

“dishevelled model of an ocean liner” that shares “a number of design elements with RMS *Titanic*” is described just five pages later, when Pynchon recounts Maxine’s first encounter with Reg on a bizarre cruise holiday. Two of her recurring professional ties (and two important plot strands) are thus delicately inflected, via chains of allusion, with tones both sugary and doom-laden, arguably heightened by the parallels that are sometimes drawn between the sinking of the great ship and 9/11 as era-defining calamities registered on a global scale.<sup>67</sup>

“Oops” also helped to establish Britney’s trademark vocal approach — an affected, slightly nasal delivery in the soubrette range — and the lyrics have provoked a range of gendered (not to mention sexually and morally charged) interpretations by music journalists. It has been condemned as “a jailbait manifesto” and lauded as a “sweetly sadistic companion to the masochism lite lurking beneath her debut” (entitled “... Baby One More Time”).<sup>68</sup> While connections to the (sado)masochistic and fetishistic practices that recur throughout Pynchon’s work are not wholly implausible,<sup>69</sup> the wider point here is that this song and its accompanying video helped to accelerate the pathologization of Britney as a symbol of both innocence and corruption at the dawn of the twenty-first century. She is a figure, as Christopher R. Smit argues, who has been “offered” to the world in “many forms”: “a child prodigy, a southern belle, an adolescent play thing, a body to be desired, a desire embodied”, ultimately culminating in her “exile” from the polis of pop culture after an unpleasant, exploitatively publicized breakdown in 2007.<sup>70</sup> The media focus on the star shaving her head, captured as it happened by the paparazzi, would seem to accentuate the air of

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Diana Gonçalves, *9/11: Culture, Catastrophe and the Critique of Singularity* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 24–25.

<sup>68</sup> David Browne, “Oops! ... I Did It Again” *Entertainment Weekly*, May 19, 2000. <https://ew.com/article/2000/05/19/oops-i-did-it-again/>; Andy Battaglia, “Sharps & Flats”, *Salon*, June 19, 2000. [https://www.salon.com/2000/06/19/britney\\_7/](https://www.salon.com/2000/06/19/britney_7/).

<sup>69</sup> As Christopher Nealon argues in relation to masochism, “[s]exuality and capital keep becoming metaphors for each other”, and “[a]sking what capital will do to ensure our compliance [...] is the hallmark and the legacy of Pynchon’s fiction.” See “Pynchon’s Children,” *Public Books*, July 1, 2014. <https://www.publicbooks.org/pynchons-children/>.

<sup>70</sup> Christopher R. Smit, *The Exile of Britney Spears: A Tale of 21st Century Consumption* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2011), 19.



ritual and sacrifice.<sup>71</sup> For Yvonne Tasker and Diana Negra, however, a pop star such as Britney can be located in the more specific context of a “postfeminist franchise” culture that fuses “empowerment rhetoric with traditionalist identity paradigms”. The “ambivalent” milieu that Britney belongs to, they suggest, cannot be accurately characterized using “straightforward distinctions between progressive and regressive” (or indeed the loaded, hyperbolic scorn and praise that fill column inches). Her songs thus celebrate a diffuse concept of “girlhood” in a way that implicitly builds on the victories secured by the activism of previous generations while at the same time remaining tied to ideologies of consumption and entrenched conceptions of femininity.<sup>72</sup>

In one sense of course, Dizzy’s quotation from “Oops” is just another surface detail — goofy, fleeting, part of the flotsam and jetsam strewn throughout *Bleeding Edge*. Moreover, it might be tempting for some readers to find an implied (and judgemental) link between the music of Britney Spears and the trashy gadgets that Dizzy peddles in his unhinged TV commercials: “closet organizers, kiwi peelers, laser-assisted wine-bottle openers, pocket rangefinders that scan the lines at the checkout” (6). The machine behind the “Britney Spears Economy” (approximately \$120 million in annual revenue between 2001 and 2008) produced innumerable novelty items and other merchandise that would not be out of place in Dizzy’s warehouse.<sup>73</sup> Going a little further, one of the more obvious critical manoeuvres here would be to frame the allusion as an expression of the “repetitive volatilization” that, according to Fredric Jameson, defines the musical dimension of mass cultural experience. There is, in effect, no “‘original’ musical text” for the scholar/detective to uncover because we encounter such music in so many different commodified environments. In this way, Jameson claims, we never really hear pop songs “for the first time”. Any attachments and meanings the listener might develop

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<sup>71</sup> Smit, *Exile*, 114.

<sup>72</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture”, in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 18, 21.

<sup>73</sup> See Smit, *Exile*, 59.

are fully as much a function of our own familiarity as of the work itself: the pop single, by means of repetition, insensibly becomes part of the existential fabric of our own lives, so that what we listen to is ourselves, our own previous auditions.<sup>74</sup>

Pop culture becoming “part of the existential fabric of our own lives” is most certainly a notable aspect of Pynchon’s fiction and is especially acute in *Bleeding Edge* given its digital emphasis. With Jameson’s framework in mind, the particularity (and to some extent the historicity) of the allusion to Britney Spears is not the point — it could just as well be Christina Aguilera, Alanis Morissette, or Limp Bizkit. Dizzy could instead quip about a genie in a bottle, rain on a wedding day, doin’ it all for the nookie, and so on. Musical allusion of this sort could therefore be understood not only in terms of all-pervasive commodification and the general “noise” of popular culture but also as the soundtrack to subjectivity itself and its tech-mediated dispersal. However, Jameson’s attempt to build on the Frankfurt School approach to mass culture is sealed off from the resurgence of musical hermeneutics<sup>75</sup> and consistently shys away from the many implications of his own notion of “volatility”. The “power” of popular music, as Shaviro ventures, may actually be rooted in (not contrary to) “its commodity status, how it works *through* the logic of repetition and commodification, and pushes this further [as a ‘volatile’ form] than any capitalist apologetics would find comfortable.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Greve and Pöhlmann’s work, while evidently indebted to Jameson, theorizes the musical unconscious as a contextual “resource of connotations that oscillate between absence and presence”. These “connotations” encompass aspects of “musical performance and its reception, technological advances and cultural and historical regimes”.<sup>77</sup> Combined with an expanded sense of the “ambivalent” field that Britney inhabits (according to Tasker and Negra), the specifics of the reference therefore acquire more substance. It exemplifies how the novel’s allusions to popular music

<sup>74</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, *Social Text* 1 (1979): 137–38.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Lawrence Kramer, *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Shaviro, “Attali’s Noise”, my emphasis.

<sup>77</sup> Greve and Pöhlmann, “Introduction”, 26, 15.

open up creative and critical possibilities that are reducible to neither hollow parody nor despairing indictments of its emptiness (like Dizzy's fraudulent cartons).

As I have already noted, Hänggi's approach to *Bleeding Edge* places a strong emphasis on how the novel's playlist can be interpreted in a post 9/11 context. He identifies, for example, the oblique nods to songs that were effectively banned from the airwaves by the Clear Channel corporation in the immediate aftermath of the attacks (REM's "It's the End of the World as We Know It", Sinatra's "New York, New York") as well as references to styles of music played by US troops during the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (metal, hip hop), and to artists whose songs have been used to torture prisoners in Guantánamo Bay.<sup>78</sup> Britney Spears is one of the latter. According to the 2005 Schmidt-Furlough report on allegations of abuse at the detention camp, so-called "futility music" was deployed as part of Gitmo's Standard Operating Procedure. "Metallica, Britney Spears, and Rap" are mentioned in the report, with further details emerging from the testimonies of detainees and military personnel.<sup>79</sup> Britney's songs were played at high volume in repeating loops while prisoners were immobilized in stress positions or subjected to strobe lighting. "Oops", specifically, has also been used by the United Kingdom's Merchant Navy to deter pirates while patrolling the coast of Somalia in the same year that *Bleeding Edge* was published.<sup>80</sup> The fact that Dizzy references the song in the presence of gadgets that subtly recall aspects of military technology helps to compound this link (the terms "laser-assisted" and "rangefinder" have lethal resonances).

This is not to say, however, that the contemporary weaponization of music is unprecedented or restricted to particular genres. Hänggi points to the use of ear-splittingly loud rock songs to weaken the resolve of Manuel Noriega during the US invasion of Panama in 1989,<sup>81</sup> and there is longer history that needs to be

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<sup>78</sup> Hänggi, "Sonic Fiction," 135–36.

<sup>79</sup> See Beryl Lipton, "Britney Spears, Lap Dances, Fatalism — A Look Inside Gitmo's Bizarre World", MuckRock, September 30, 2015. <https://www.muckrock.com/news/archives/2015/sep/30/guantanamo-sop/>.

<sup>80</sup> Tim Jonze, "Britney Spears' Music used by British Navy to Scare off Somali Pirates", *The Guardian*, October 29, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/29/britney-spears-navy-scare-somali-pirates>.

<sup>81</sup> Hänggi, "Sonic Fiction," 135.

acknowledged here. As Alex Ross states, “[m]usic has accompanied acts of war since trumpets sounded at the walls of Jericho.”<sup>82</sup> This link to antiquity also functions as a dismal reminder that music, and specifically musical heritage, can sometimes be counted among the casualties of war given the damage to the Bull-headed lyre of Ur, one of the world’s oldest stringed instruments, after the National Museum of Iraq was flooded during the first phase of the US invasion in 2003.<sup>83</sup> Pascal Quignard’s *Hatred of Music* (1996) explores, amongst other things, the deeply unsettling role of orchestral sound in the Holocaust. “I am examining the bonds between music and acoustic suffering”, he proclaims in the book’s first treatise. “Terror and music. *Mousikè* and *pavor*. I find these words to be inextricably linked — however allogenic and anachronistic they may be in relation to one another.”<sup>84</sup> Most pertinently, Katia Chornik has studied music during dictatorial rule in Chile. Pinochet’s secret police utilized songs by Julio Iglesias, Walter Carlos’s soundtrack for *A Clockwork Orange*, and George Harrison’s anti-sectarian ballad “My Sweet Lord” as sonic instruments of torture,<sup>85</sup> while at the same time outlawing the *Nueva Canción* folk movement and murdering Víctor Jara (its figurehead and most brilliant proponent).<sup>86</sup> Jara was kidnapped and killed just days after the CIA-backed coup against Salvador Allende. The “first recorded job” of Nicholas Windust, the shadowy federal agent and “neoliberal terrorist” who Maxine finds herself disturbingly entangled with in *Bleeding Edge*, is as a “field operative” involved with an earlier atrocity that took place on September 11 — “Santiago, Chile, [...] 1973” (108).

<sup>82</sup> Alex Ross, “When Music is Violence”, *The New Yorker*, July 4, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/04/when-music-is-violence>.

<sup>83</sup> See Matthew Bogdanos, “The Casualties of War: The Truth about the Iraq Museum”, *American Journal of Archaeology* 109, no. 3 (2005): 477–526.

<sup>84</sup> Pascal Quignard, *The Hatred of Music*, trans. Matthew Amos and Fredrik Rönnbäck (1996; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>85</sup> See Katia Chornik, “Music and Torture in Chilean Detention Centers: Conversations with an Ex-agent of Pinochet’s Secret Police”, *The World of Music* 2, no. 1 (2013): 51–65; “Memories of Music in Political Detention in Chile under Pinochet”, *Travesía: Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2018): 157–73.

<sup>86</sup> See the extensive discussions of Jara in Jedrek Mularski, *Music, Politics, and Nationalism in Latin America: Chile During the Cold War Era* (New York: Cambria Press, 2014).

The inhumane and illegal punishment meted out in Gitmo is of course not the direct responsibility of Britney Spears, even when factoring in a toe-curling (but also rather smugly derided) interview on CNN's aptly named "Crossfire" (**Figure 2**). The interview took place a week after her onstage kiss with Madonna at the MTV Awards and roughly five months after the invasion of Iraq: "I think we should just trust our president in every decision he makes and should just support that, you know, and be faithful [sic] in what happens". Footage from the interview, which also included a question about the singer's favourite kind of Pepsi (the answer: "Pepsi's Pepsi"), was subsequently used by Michael Moore in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004).<sup>87</sup> Britney, in fact, was once described as "our President Bush" by the founder of the entertainment news outlet *TMZ* and skewered in a *Rolling Stone* profile as "the canary in the coal mine of our culture". She is the "perfect celebrity for America in decline", wrote Vanessa Grigoriadis. "She just doesn't give a fuck".<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, this use of her songs — no matter where one might stand vis-à-vis anxieties about commodification,



**Figure 2:** Britney on CNN's "Crossfire", September 3, 2003.

<sup>87</sup> A transcript of Spears' conversation with Tucker Carlson is available here: <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/Music/09/03/cnna.spears/>.

<sup>88</sup> Vanessa Grigoriadis, "The Tragedy of Britney Spears", *Rolling Stone*, May 6, 2008. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-tragedy-of-britney-spears-rolling-stones-2008-cover-story-254735/>.

mass culture, the gender politics and cruelty of stardom, or the types of insight we demand from performers — points to the genuinely sinister side of music's volatile and/or vulnerable quality when harnessed by the Military-Industrial Complex. This does not invalidate Shaviro's insistence that popular music has the capacity to "work through" or elude the grim forces of co-optation in ways that are perhaps yet to be fully realized or theorized. But there are clearly questions of cost and complicity in play here — awful and harrowing noises echoing around the musical unconscious, the sonic equivalent of what Pynchon would call "bad karma". Indeed, Maxine's response to the Britney allusion (a time-travelling reference, as it were, that points forward to post-9/11 warfare while also connecting to past conflicts) could be interpreted on some level as an attempt to ward this off. She grits her teeth and starts whistling "Help Me, Rhonda", the classic 1965 single by the Beach Boys (7).

One immediate temptation might therefore be to pit Brian Wilson's compositional wizardry against Britney's Full-Spectrum Dominance, the pop visionary vs. the corporate construct. Indeed, the music of the Beach Boys offers a distinctive combination of instantly hummable sunshine melodies and crafty experimentalism, of the clean cut and the far out. The band feature in *Inherent Vice*<sup>89</sup> and Pynchon is said to have met Brian Wilson during the original *Smile* sessions in 1967 (although by all accounts the encounter was a rather stilted affair).<sup>90</sup> Lyrically, "Help Me, Rhonda"'s emphasis on finding a new lover after being jilted, an oddly jaunty expression of "emotional desperation", also functions as a sort of riposte to "Oops".<sup>91</sup> However, as with the Britney reference and the wider contextual framework of the two Woodstocks, there are many vibrations to contend with, already hinted at by the slight disjunction between lyrical content

<sup>89</sup> Doc Sportello sings "a few falsetto bars of 'Wouldn't It Be Nice'" to his on/off partner Penny (72) and the novel closes with the hippie detective driving through a thick fog (of metaphor too), with "God Only Knows" on the Vibrasonic (368). Tracks 1 and 8 on *Pet Sounds*, Capitol, 1966.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Ames Carlin explains that Pynchon was introduced to Wilson by Jules Siegel: "[T]he famous hipster novelist sat in stunned, unhappy silence while the nervous, stoned pop star [...] kept on knocking over the oil lamp he was trying to light. 'Brian was kind of afraid of Pynchon, because he'd heard he was an Eastern intellectual establishment genius,' Siegel recalls, 'and Pynchon wasn't very articulate.'" See *Catch a Wave: The Rise, Fall & Redemption of the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson* (New York: Rodale, 2006), 103–04.

<sup>91</sup> Siegel, *Catch a Wave*, 73.

and vocal delivery in a number of the Beach Boys' tracks. The tale of Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys is, after all, another narrative of opposites collapsing into one another – innocence and experience, virtue and vice, creativity and destruction – that compellingly overlaps with many of Pynchon's enduring concerns while also exposing some unexpected parallels with the “ambivalence” of the Britney phenomenon.

After beginning life as a garage band, the group forged a unique Californian sound forever associated with dreamy yet bittersweet evocations of youthful high jinks and endless summer. They revolutionised studio-recording techniques, and Wilson is widely regarded as one of popular music's geniuses (compared to Mozart, for instance, in a BBC feature).<sup>92</sup> As Ben Ratliff writes, the Beach Boys are now “heavy” with an aura of “honor”, “fixed identity”, and “essential rightness.”<sup>93</sup> However, credibility or cultural capital of the kind denied to Britney is no defence against the violent repurposing of music and its trappings. The pre-9/11 examples of music-as-torture outlined above are testament to this and two of the not-so-secret locations on the Guantánamo base are named “Strawberry Fields” and “Penny Lane” after Beatles songs.<sup>94</sup> Neither does exceptional talent provide immunity from other forms of tension, contradiction, and imbroglio. The Beach Boys helped to prepare some of the ground for the sixties countercultural explosion, with the band going on to absorb aspects of LSD-soaked psychedelia, but the square aspects of their sound and image meant that this relationship was a consistently awkward one.<sup>95</sup> The succinctly focused song-writing and teenage angst of their early work laid foundations for the Ramones and SoCal skate punk, yet Brian Wilson has claimed, albeit with a strong hint of disingenuousness, that he is baffled by “fast music”.<sup>96</sup> The group once adapted

<sup>92</sup> Carl Wilson, “The Beach Boys' Brian Wilson: America's Mozart?”, *BBC Culture*, June 9, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150608-is-this-americas-mozart>.

<sup>93</sup> Ben Ratliff, “Looking for the Beach Boys”, *The New York Review of Books*, October 26, 2016. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/10/26/looking-for-the-beach-boys-fifty-years-later/>.

<sup>94</sup> See David Johnston and Mark Mazzetti, “A Window into CIA's Secret Jails”, *The New York Times*, August 12, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/13/world/13foggo.html>.

<sup>95</sup> See Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 136–37.

<sup>96</sup> See Adrian Devoy, “Beach Boy Brian Wilson: ‘Punk rock? I don't know what that is’”, *The Guardian*, April 9, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/apr/09/beach-boy-brian-wilson-punk-rock-love-and-mercy>.



and released a song written by Charles Manson.<sup>97</sup> In 1983, just prior to the Orwellian year in which *Vineland* is set, the Beach Boys were dubbed “America’s Band” by Ronald Reagan (**Figure 3**). They became “willing participants in presidential political theater” and were framed as the musical embodiment of the wholesome family values and unquestioning patriotism that *Bleeding Edge* identifies as ideologically resurgent in the wake of 9/11.<sup>98</sup> The band were a regular fixture at federally-sanctioned Fourth of July celebrations in the early eighties, despite their epic and well-documented substance abuse (a concern once raised by Reagan’s Interior Secretary James Watt) and their support for environmental programs that were distinctly at odds with burgeoning neoliberal policy.<sup>99</sup> During the 2008 primaries, in the “future” beyond *Bleeding Edge*’s present, presidential hopeful John McCain infamously referred to an “old Beach Boys song” called “Bomb Iran” before singing a few bars in front of an audience in South Carolina (actually a novelty track by Vince Vance & the Valiants



**Figure 3:** The President and the Beach Boys, June 12, 1983 (Reagan Library, YouTube).

<sup>97</sup> “Never Learn Not to Love” was the B-side to the 1968 single “Bluebirds Over the Mountain”. Both tracks then featured on the album *20/20*, Capitol, 1969. Manson’s original, titled “Ceased to Exist”, was later released during his trial — track 2, side B on *Lie: The Love and Terror Cult*, Awareness Records, 1970. Carlin explains the brief relationship between Dennis Wilson and Manson in *Catch a Wave*, 137–39.

<sup>98</sup> Daniel Nester, “Be True To Your School”, *The New York Times*, July 2, 2012. <https://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/02/be-true-to-your-school/>.

<sup>99</sup> See Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 244–46.



that borrows the tune of “Barbara Ann”).<sup>100</sup> If the Beach Boys’ fabled *Smile* has been conceived of by Ratliff as an “underground labyrinth of melody” — melodies that were being honed when Pynchon met Brian Wilson but not publicly heard until the twenty-first century — then there is also something labyrinthine about the group’s legacy and their conscious and unconscious affiliations with power.<sup>101</sup>

With family values in mind, one might note both the “Mansonoid” resonances of “family”, an important aspect of *Inherent Vice*, and the fact that *Bleeding Edge*, the novel which follows it, often appears intensely preoccupied with childhood and parenthood. More groundedly, Pynchon’s choice of “Help Me, Rhonda” is germane here given the story of its creation. The original recording of the song for *The Beach Boys Today!* LP was interrupted by the inebriated and obnoxious Murry Wilson (father of Brian, Carl and Dennis).<sup>102</sup> An extraordinary, expletive-laden psychodrama was caught on tape and subsequently circulated as a bootleg by obsessive fans and collectors (it is now of course available to anyone on YouTube). In addition, Carol Kaye, the session bass player on the track and part of a broader, unacknowledged family that helped propel the band forward, was reportedly the victim of an abusive perfectionism. She was asked to repeat her part so many times that “her fingers were almost bleeding.” Kaye explains that she showed Brian Wilson her middle one after finally being congratulated on a job well done.<sup>103</sup> The song’s “infectious spirit”, the warm energy of its shuffle-beat and lush, doo-wop-influenced vocals,<sup>104</sup> can therefore be linked to a series of dissonant, painful B-sides — the sounds and sensations of fury, manic labour, Oedipal darkness, and resentment. An analogous story of bleed-

<sup>100</sup> The Beach Boys’ “Barbara Ann”, the final track on *The Beach Boys Party!* (Capitol, 1965), is actually a cover. It was written by Fred Fasset and released by The Regents as a 7-inch single via Gee Records in 1961. Fasset sings second tenor. The “Bomb Iran” parody version dates back to the 1979 hostage crisis.

<sup>101</sup> Ratliff, “Looking.” The band worked on *Smile* between 1966 and 1967, with the songs eventually surfacing as a Brian Wilson solo album for Nonesuch in 2004. This was followed by an approximation of the lost original played by the surviving Beach Boys called *The Smile Sessions*, Capitol, 2011.

<sup>102</sup> See Al Hunter, “‘Help Me, Rhonda’: The Real Story”, *The Weekly View*, February 26, 2015. <http://weeklyview.net/2015/02/26/help-me-rhonda-the-real-story/>.

<sup>103</sup> As related to Gus Russo, archived by the online repository of Brian Wilson lore, *Surfer Moon*. See <https://www.surfermoon.com/essays/owncharts.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Philip Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson: The Songs, Sounds, and Influences of the Beach Boys’ Founding Genius* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 187.

ing for pop that perhaps also highlights music's complex relationship to the body and to gendered forms of exploitation and sacrifice can be detected in the swirling noise and information behind the Britney reference. As reported by *MTV News*, the singer suffered an injury during the video shoot for "Oops" after being struck on the head by falling camera equipment, receiving four stitches before resuming her performance.<sup>105</sup>

This does not mean that *Bleeding Edge* erases all distinctions between these "blood tracks"<sup>106</sup> or that committed value judgements about popular music are somehow off the table. Rather, engaging with the *Bleeding Edge* playlist means coming to terms with a complex series of contexts, compromises, and (guilty) pleasures. It also demonstrates how it is the very "ambivalence" and "volatility" of popular music that makes it so worrisome and, simultaneously, so useful to authority. Thus, the "smooth legato phrasing" of Frank Sinatra,<sup>107</sup> to be discussed further vis-à-vis the novel's allusions to metal, was briefly considered taboo during the corporate policing of the airwaves after 9/11, while explicitly anti-establishment and/or pacifistic songs have been deployed in sonic and ideological warfare. Similarly, when citizens of Kabul waved cassette players and radios (forbidden under the Taliban in one of that regime's first edicts) before reporters in 2002, music was pointed to as a potent herald of democratic freedom by the very same military powers responsible for its most recent weaponization.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Tina Johnson, "Britney Spears Suffers Head Injury On Video Set", *MTV News*, March 28, 2000. <http://www.mtv.com/news/1434387/britney-spears-suffers-head-injury-on-video-set/>.

<sup>106</sup> In the spirit of Pynchonian layering, this phrase is inspired in equal measure by the "bloody" and/or tumultuous backstories behind these musical allusions, by the various resonances of the phrase "bleeding edge" (Pynchon's titles have always provided scholars with suggestive frameworks for conceptualizing his work), by Bob Dylan's acclaimed album, and by a mid-eighties video nasty featuring the forgotten hair metal band Easy Action. See Bob Dylan, *Blood on the Tracks*, Columbia Records, 1975; *Blood Tracks*, directed by Mats Helge Olsson and Derek Ford (1985; Studio S Entertainment, 2012), DVD.

<sup>107</sup> Ted Gioia, *The Jazz Standards: A Guide to the Repertoire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 437.

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, John Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 3–4.

#### IV. Pigs' Heads and Bobby-Soxers

If Britney's "Oops" represents one of the novel's musical extremes, Pynchon's references to metal would appear to locate us in a very different dimension. In various senses, though, these extremes can be understood as an expression of interconnect-edness. It could be argued, for instance, that the novel's musical allusions, when conceptualised as a playlist, reflect some of the potentially stimulating ways digital listening challenges long-standing formats and overrides many of the sociological factors that have kept contrasting or divisive styles of music in separate realms. This possibility comes with the proviso, as Ratliff warns in *Every Song Ever* (2016), that surrendering to the algorithms of streaming services can create "bottomless comfort zones", a risk which connects to the novel's wider concern with the internet as an instrument of control and/or narcissistic distraction.<sup>109</sup> Ratliff's warning, in an otherwise optimistic discussion of the "compensations" of digital listening, also helps to put some of the zeal of Attali's pre-Big Data utopianism into perspective (specifically his image of the consumer-as-producer and the emancipatory "mutation[s]" that emerge from "[p]leasure tied to the self-directed gaze"),<sup>110</sup> while at the same time lending a new pertinence to Adorno's pummelling critique, for all its wince-inducing elements, of atomistic "regressive" listening.<sup>111</sup>

More groundedly, though, the sonic extremes of Pynchon's novel can be brought into contact with each other given Hänggi's claim that music in *Bleeding Edge* acquires a variety of charged meanings in the light of 9/11 and the War on Terror – a framework that is equally applicable to bubblegum pop and crunching riffs. With my focus now shifting to the latter, Jonathan R. Pieslak's interviews with US troops for his study *Sound Targets* (2009) are immediately revealing. Iraq veteran Joshua Revak, for example, explains how genres associated with aggression often provided the soundtrack to military operations: "A lot of people couldn't roll out without music.[...] A lot of guys would listen [...] and get really pumped up, like predator kind

<sup>109</sup> Ben Ratliff, *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen to Music Now* (St Ives: Allen Lane, 2016), 8.

<sup>110</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 144.

<sup>111</sup> See Adorno, "Fetish".

of music I guess, things like that, metal, hardcore.”<sup>112</sup> Other soldiers have referred to “war itself” as “heavy metal”.<sup>113</sup> What is striking, though, is that Pynchon’s novel does *not* reference the nü metal bands popular with troops (Drowning Pool’s “Bodies”, released in May 2001, is said to have acquired a special status in a battlefield context and would not be an anachronistic inclusion given the novel’s timeframe).<sup>114</sup> Neither, despite the Napster connection and the use of their music in Guantánamo, does he allude to established stadium acts such as Metallica (not just one of the “Big Four” of thrash but one of the biggest-selling artists of all time, mostly thanks to the crossover success of their 1991 self-titled album).<sup>115</sup> Instead, he namechecks underground bands from the black metal sub-genre: Sarcófago, a Brazilian act whose 1987 debut, *I.N.R.I.*, is cherished by aficionados, alongside Burzum and Mayhem, two of the key artists in the notorious Norwegian black metal scene that rose to prominence in the early nineties.

These noisemakers, now legendary figures for a sizeable and dedicated global fanbase but at no point in danger of bothering the *Billboard* charts (or performing at any version of Woodstock), are listed as the favourites of Eric Outfield, a foot fetishist and Deep Web hacker, who provides one of the novel’s bluntest critiques of digital corporatization. “‘Look at it,’” he grumbles to Maxine, “‘keyboards and screens turning into nothing but portals to Web sites for what the Management wants everybody addicted to, shopping, gaming, jerking off, streaming endless garbage’” (432). Given his association with underground music, an instructive parallel can be drawn here between Eric and Isaiah Two Four in *Vineland*, the mohawked member of the Vomitones punk band who passes memorably incisive judgement on the counter-culture’s failure to understand the power of television.<sup>116</sup> When Eric and fellow tech

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Jonathan R. Pieslak, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 52.

<sup>113</sup> Pieslak, *Sound Targets*, 52. Pieslak is referring to comments made in George Gittoes’ documentary *Soundtrack to War* (2005).

<sup>114</sup> Pieslak, *Sound Targets*, 52. Greve and Pöhlmann also touch on the song’s significance in Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, 26.

<sup>115</sup> Metallica, *Metallica*, Elektra, 1991. Commonly referred to as “The Black Album” on account of its cover art.

<sup>116</sup> “‘Whole problem ‘th you folks’s generation,’ Isaiah opined, ‘nothing personal, is you believed in

nerd Driscoll Padgett end up at Maxine's apartment as "real-estate casualties" of 9/11, black metal is the "soundtrack of choice" for their "spare-room activities" when under the influence of Ambien, the sleeping pill that can be used recreationally for its hallucinatory and libido-boosting effects (332–33). The squalling bleakness of black metal, which often prioritises wall-of-sound atmosphere over anything resembling a hook, sometimes verging on a kind of infernal psychedelia, is superficially (and of course humorously) set up as the headache-inducing alternative to the rather more sedate tunes enjoyed by Maxine and her estranged husband, Horst, who have resumed their "marital relations" by this point in the narrative. Horst is rendered "helpless", we are told, upon hearing "the most poignant B-flat in all lounge music", and "Maxine has long ago learned to seize the moment" (332). The enchanting B-flat in question can be heard in "Time After Time", a light jazz standard written by Cahn and Styne that was first popularized by Frank Sinatra's performance in the 1947 movie *It Happened in Brooklyn* (accompanied by a young off-screen André Previn on piano).<sup>117</sup> Perhaps not-so-incidentally, the note that Pynchon emphasizes here was cemented into the foundations of Western composition out of musico-theological necessity. For church musicians in the later Middle Ages, flattening B to a perfect fifth below F helped to avoid the dreaded *diabolus in musica* (also known as the tritone or augmented fourth in modern tonal theory).<sup>118</sup> Centuries later, that once forbidden sound would become a core characteristic of heavy metal, with Tommy Iommi's opening guitar chords on Black Sabbath's debut heralding the birth of this most intricately and passionately stratified genre.<sup>119</sup> It is especially integral to black metal's disreputable chthonic racket.

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your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it—but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, the whole alternative America, el deado meato". See Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1990), 373. Like Eric, Isaiah provides sharp critical insight, but Pynchon offsets this by describing the young punk as a "violence enthusiast" (19).

<sup>117</sup> See Gioia, 437–38; *It Happened in Brooklyn*, directed by Richard Whorf (1947; Warner Bros, 2001), VHS.

<sup>118</sup> Erwin Esser Nemmers, *Twenty Centuries of Catholic Church Music* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 62.

<sup>119</sup> Black Sabbath, "Black Sabbath", track 1 on *Black Sabbath*, Vertigo, 1970.

As a result of the headlines and fright it generated for a brief period in the nineties, black metal is a sub-genre that is arguably more written about and debated than actually listened to (although Pynchon could well be the first literary writer to acknowledge its existence). Given the vigorous contestation of certain events, influences, and milestones, any account is likely to raise hackles in one way or another. It is fair to say, however, that Mayhem and Burzum, the two Norwegian acts listed by Pynchon, developed out of a relatively diffuse selection of 1980s extreme metal bands. Notable points of reference from this period include Bathory (whose early albums had the most discernible impact on the so-called “second wave”), Hellhammer, Celtic Frost, and Venom (whose 1982 album gave the sub-genre its name while not contributing greatly to the idiosyncrasies of its sound).<sup>120</sup> Mayhem, who released their punk-inflected *Deathcrush* EP in 1987, provide something of a bridge between black metal’s beginnings and its moment in the spotlight. Sarcófago, who disrupt the Eurocentrism of the typical origin story because of their roots in Belo Horizonte, corresponded with members of the youthful Mayhem and are sometimes credited with pioneering the use of “corpsepaint”.<sup>121</sup> This black-and-white face makeup, designed to make performers appear undead or ghoulish, treads a fine line between the ridiculous and the genuinely unnerving, and has become one of the sub-genre’s most recognisable visual tropes.

Musically, Norwegian black metal from the early nineties is defined by its “necro” sound: ferociously raw production; repetitive, grinding guitar work interspersed or overlaid with tremolo picking; blast-beat drums; tortured, barely decipherable vocals (Varg Vikernes, the lone creative force behind Burzum, explains that he screamed through a call center head-set instead of a real microphone on early recordings).<sup>122</sup> Lyrics often draw on Satanic and occult themes, combining shock-value belligerence with a more depressive and brooding emphasis on existential desolation or the

<sup>120</sup> See Dayal Patterson, *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2013), 25–35, 36–46, 47–57, 6–16.

<sup>121</sup> See Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 1998), 36.

<sup>122</sup> Interviewed in the documentary *Until the Light Takes Us*, directed by Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell (Shock Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

experience of the freezing wilderness (Norway's landscapes are clearly a significant inspiration). Per "Dead" Ohlin, the singer in Mayhem from 1988 until his suicide in 1991, would perform in clothes left to rot in the ground, mutilate himself on stage with broken glass, and throw pigs' heads into the audience. In a rare interview, he speaks with pride about quickly reducing a crowd of 300 people to 50 as a result of such behaviour.<sup>123</sup> According to Thurston Moore, the early years of Mayhem can be understood in terms of "the reality and irreality of mortification through the expression of annihilating sound and passion."<sup>124</sup>

Ohlin's morbid, confrontational antics and eventual suicide — "a kid", as Moore writes, "who felt death as his ultimate gesture and invocation of the expulsion of self"<sup>125</sup> — muddle the distinctions between youthful nihilism, mental illness, and performance art. All of this was eclipsed, however, by the subsequent grotesquery that Norwegian black metal will forever be associated with. Øystein "Euronymous" Aarseth, Mayhem's guitarist and one of the scene's principle ideologues, crassly took photographs of his bandmate's corpse (one of which was shared in the mail and eventually used as the cover for a live bootleg).<sup>126</sup> This prompted the disgusted resignation of the group's bassist, Jorn "Necrobutcher" Stubberud. Varg Vikernes was asked to cover Stubberud's role as a new line-up pressed on with the recording of their debut album.<sup>127</sup> For reasons that will perhaps never be definitively clear, Vikernes then murdered Aarseth on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1993 — stabbing him 23 times in his Oslo home. He was also held responsible for burning down four Lutheran churches, including Fantoft Stave, an eleventh-century national landmark. A photograph of the charred wooden frame adorns the cover of the Burzum EP *Aske* (Norwegian for 'ashes').<sup>128</sup>

<sup>123</sup> See Jon Kristiansen, "Evil: Mayhem", *Metalion: The Slayer Mag Diaries*, ed. Tara G. Warrior (New York: Bazillion Points Books, 2011), 290.

<sup>124</sup> Thurston Moore, "Afterword", in Jorn Stubberud, *The Death Archives: Mayhem 1984–94* (London: Ecstatic Peace Library, 2016), 253.

<sup>125</sup> Moore, "Afterword", 253.

<sup>126</sup> *Dawn of the Black Hearts* (1995). A recording of a Mayhem concert in Sarpsborg, Norway, 1990, released by the Columbian label Warmaster Records.

<sup>127</sup> *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas*. Eventually released by Deathlike Silence Productions in 1994.

<sup>128</sup> Patterson provides a summary of the church burnings (159–70) and the murder of Aarseth (170–80). Burzum's EP was released by Deathlike Silence Productions in 1993.

The musician once known by the moniker “Count Grishnackh” (a Tolkien reference) served 15 years of his prison sentence, during which time Burzum evolved into an ambient synth project, and now runs the “Thulean Perspective” YouTube channel – a baleful and pathetic phantasmagoria of blood-and-soil survivalism, neo-pagan spirituality, and racist pseudo-science. A year before the publication of *Bleeding Edge*, it was revealed that Vikernes had lived for a brief period of his childhood in Baghdad, his father part of a team of nation-building engineers hired by the Iraqi Ba’ath Party at the start of Saddam Hussein’s rule in 1979. Through black metal, Pynchon therefore alludes to some disquieting instances of “art bleeding into reality”,<sup>129</sup> as well as to genuine musical innovation, and to a series of what Greve and Pöhlmann call “cultural and historical regimes” (both prior to and beyond the novel’s immediate time span). As a consequence, further waves of sound and fury can be heard echoing through the musical unconscious of this text: the unholy shrieks and darkly poetic utterances of Ohlin; the din of amplifier feedback and media notoriety; cracks emerging in social democratic models, given Norwegian black metal’s emergence from a kind of “exhaustion” with “easy life”;<sup>130</sup> heated debates about the value of art made by dangerous, prejudiced, and compromised men. The sound, to paraphrase Moore, of all hell breaking loose.

Since the murder of Aarseth, black metal has flirted with the mainstream while also concentrating into increasingly specialized niches. More polished acts have achieved significant levels of mainstream success and Norwegian diplomats have been briefed on black metal’s cultural significance as a result.<sup>131</sup> Like that of the Beach Boys, its legacy spreads out in many directions. Black metal has influenced

<sup>129</sup> Moore, “Afterword”, 253.

<sup>130</sup> This phrase is borrowed from the intriguing reflections on modern art by Gylve “Fenriz” Nagell of the band Darkthrone in *Until the Light Takes Us*.

<sup>131</sup> See Imke von Helden, *Norwegian Native Art: Cultural Identity in Norwegian Metal Music* (Zürich, LIT Verlag: 2017), 5, 171. Also note that an NRK documentary about Mayhem’s 2017 tour of Central America explores their “ambassadorial” role. The presenter Thomas Seltzer, a well-known TV personality in Norway and a childhood friend of Stubberud, describes black metal as an “export” on a par with oil and Salmon, and the documentary features various ruminations on what Stubberud calls the band’s “heritage” status. See “Los Bambinos del Satan: On the Road with Mayhem” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RF3B-RjWDg>.



avant-garde musicians who would never dream of growing their hair or wearing a bullet belt and has been placed into (seemingly) unlikely dialogue with traditions ranging from techno to African American field songs. It has been packaged, parodied, and reinvented — not so much as the “utopia/dystopia dialectic” that Gair identifies in sixties counterculture, nor the dialectic that informs Attali’s musings on the distinct phases of musical development, but as a typically Pynchonian intertwining of incorporation, appropriation, and resistance, of idealised authenticity and cynical theatricality, of creative freefall and the laws of genre. A group of cross-disciplinary academics has even developed Black Metal Theory: “a speculative [...] endeavour,” according to the manifesto of the journal *Helvete*, which “eschew[s] any approach that treats theory and metal discretely, preferring to take the left-hand path by insisting on some kind of connaturality between the two, a shared capacity for nigredo.”<sup>132</sup> This would surely tickle the author who refers in *Vineland* to “the indispensable *Italian Wedding Fake Book*, by Deleuze & Guattari,” used by the Vomitones at a mob gig (97), and in *Bleeding Edge* to an NYU critical theorist who interprets Reg’s pirate video career as a “neo-Brechtian subversion of the diegesis” (9).<sup>133</sup>

On the subject of academia, Wagner Lamounier of Sarcófago, “all of whose CDs are present in Eric’s effects” (333), has been (since 2004) a Professor of Economic Science and Applied Statistics at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. He has been a notable critic of the Norwegian scene, while maintaining that authentic black metal must be considered “the most depraved and disgusting kind of sick music around” and is not “a capitalist merchandise item”. He describes early Sarcófago as “a revolt” against religious and political “oppression” — note here that Maxine’s therapist, Shawn, conceives of US capitalism as “the holy fuckin market” (338) — and stresses that “[t]he world of economists is darker and sadder than the one of metal.”<sup>134</sup> Pynchon would surely concur with this verdict. Brazil, of course, was part of the Latin American state-terror

<sup>132</sup> See <https://blackmetalththeory.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>133</sup> Jeeshan Gazi provides a stimulating discussion of the episode in *Vineland*. See “On Deleuze and Guattari’s *Italian Wedding Fake Book*: Pynchon, Improvisation, Social Organisation, and Assemblage”, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 4, no. 2. <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.192>.

<sup>134</sup> See Kim Kelly, “Wagner Antichrist Interview: Sarcófago Refuses to Die”, *Iron Fist Zine*, August 23, 2016. <http://www.ironfistzine.com/2012/08/23/wagner-antichrist-interview-sarcofago-refuses-to-die/>.

campaign known as “Operation Condor”, actively facilitated by the US. Having helped to depose Salvador Allende in Chile, Windust moves to neighboring Argentina. He, revealingly, stays on after the Dirty War “to advise the IMF stooges that rose to power in its aftermath” and has a “thirty-year history of visiting-lecturer gigs, including the infamous School of the Americas” (108–09).<sup>135</sup> Yet again, musical allusion proves to be an integral but not immediately apparent element of Pynchon’s imbrication of historicity and futurity (in this particular case a layering of political and artistic shock doctrines). While Lamounier has consigned black metal to his past, Mayhem have continued to write and perform music. Against considerable odds given their “fractured lineage”,<sup>136</sup> Stubberud has resumed bass duties and the experimental vocalist Attila Csihar (a vegetarian influenced by Diamanda Galás and Mongolian throat singing) is enjoying his longest stretch in the band (**Figure 4**). They have navigated a path through tragedy and changing times, and achieved a level of functionality and popularity that would have been inconceivable to those who once scurried from fly-



**Figure 4:** Attila Csihar, performing “Freezing Moon” in December 2015 (official Mayhem on YouTube).

<sup>135</sup> For more information, see, for example, Lesley Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

<sup>136</sup> Moore, “Afterword”, 253.

ing pigs' heads. Pynchon's claim in his liner notes for *Lotion* that "a working band is a miracle of everyday life" takes on a special kind of acuity in this light.<sup>137</sup>

Although the leap from Frank Sinatra to black metal appears to represent one of the novel's starkest juxtapositions, the same kind of complexity that characterizes the relationship between "Oops" and "Help Me, Rhonda" can be detected in this sequence. Indeed, in strictly musical terms, the fact that lounge jazz and extreme metal can find a common home in, say, the compositions of John Zorn (a MacArthur Fellow, like Pynchon), where they are not simply deployed as clashing elements for cheap postmodern thrills, is an indication of hidden depths and cross-currents.<sup>138</sup> With the previous pairing in mind, the Sinatra allusion actually provides the more direct connection to the battlefield — even if black metal is clearly associated with both physical and sonic violence — as well as pointing to a pre-9/11, pre-digital history of music's entanglement with power, politics, cultish devotion, and altered states. The link, however, is not to Iraq and Afghanistan but to World War Two. Sinatra, who was once denied a visa to travel on behalf of the United Service Organizations because of his FBI file, eventually visited and performed for troops in North Africa and Italy with the comedian Phil Silvers in 1945. Special pressings of his songs were also sent to the front lines. This helped to dispel a suspicion in certain military circles that he was a "spoiled malingerer" who had used "special connections to avoid the draft." The USO tour came a year after the "Columbus Day Riot", where 30,000 frenzied "bobby-soxers", desperate to see their idol at the Paramount, caused chaos in midtown Manhattan, and tore apart the Theater's box office after most were denied entry.<sup>139</sup>

Sinatra's relationship with the US military and government is multifaceted, as early concerns about the sincerity of his patriotism indicate (concerns that also

<sup>137</sup> Pynchon, liner notes.

<sup>138</sup> Pynchon received the so-called "Genius Grant" in 1988 (aged 51), Zorn in 2006 (aged 53). Both have brief profiles archived online: <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/>. Studies of Zorn, which are surprisingly few, include John Brackett, *John Zorn: Tradition and Transgression* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) and Tamar Barzel, *New York Noise: Radical Jewish Culture and the Downtown Scene* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

<sup>139</sup> Chris Rojek, *Frank Sinatra* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 100, 18.

extended to the apparently intoxicating, gendered effects of his voice and looks in a wartime context). The crooner once suspected of communist sympathies, subsequently a regular visitor at JFK's Camelot before expulsion due to his mob links, was wooed by Richard Nixon in the early seventies as "part of a conscious strategy" to define the terms of the Vietnam debate.<sup>140</sup> Openly dismissive of a one-time Hollywood cowboy's campaign for the governorship of California, Sinatra later helped to raise \$4 million for the "Republican coffers" during Reagan's bid to become Commander-in-Chief.<sup>141</sup> Sinatra and the different phases of his musical output are therefore intimately connected to the presidential eras that in some respects define Pynchon's work. He was given a full military funeral, despite never actually serving, as a kind of "surrogate old soldier" — authorized by Bill Clinton in 1998.<sup>142</sup> At the same time, Sinatra displayed a consistently "antiauthoritarian" attitude towards "top brass" and — with the important exception of Major Ben Marco in *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)<sup>143</sup> — made a point of playing "rank-and-file servicemen" on the big screen.<sup>144</sup> His first Academy Award was for his portrayal of a soldier stationed in Hawaii prior to Pearl Harbor in Fred Zinnemann's *From Here to Eternity* (1953).<sup>145</sup>

*It Happened in Brooklyn*, the film that debuted "Time After Time", exemplifies Sinatra's musico-cinematic engagement with soldiering differently. It revolves around a GI named Danny Miller returning to his native Brooklyn after the end of the war, having carried a photograph of the iconic bridge throughout his service (**Figure 5**). Danny struggles against hardship and an unwelcome sense of dislocation from his

<sup>140</sup> John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>141</sup> Rojek, *Sinatra*, 52.

<sup>142</sup> Rojek, *Sinatra*, 101.

<sup>143</sup> According to Rojek, "the reason why Sinatra so relished playing the part of Major Ben Marco [...] is that the brainwashed Marco eventually exposes both his Korean controllers *and* their establishment puppets, John and Eleanor Iselin (played by James Gregory and Angela Lansbury). The moral is that the establishment is always rotten". Rojek connects this to Sinatra's investment in a certain kind of "meritocratic" idealism, which also accounts for "his notably relaxed attitude to the Mafia, who sought to realize the American dream by illegal activity." Rojek, *Sinatra*, 27.

<sup>144</sup> Rojek, *Sinatra*, 100.

<sup>145</sup> For best supporting actor. Sinatra also won for his performance as a heroin addict in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, directed by Otto Preminger, 1955.



**Figure 5:** “Isn’t she a beauty?” Frank Sinatra as GI Miller on Brooklyn Bridge.

beloved borough, eventually pursuing a singing career and finding true love with a nurse he first met in England (a fellow Brooklynite played by Gloria Grahame). The merits of the film are almost entirely musical. Cahn and Styne’s song is now a standard, and other highlights include a surprising rendition of “Là ci darem la mano” from *Don Giovanni* that sees Sinatra duetting with the soprano Kathryn Grayson (a strange, “never distributed version” of Mozart’s opera featuring the Marx Brothers is briefly described in *Bleeding Edge* [418]). As a contrived, easy-going romantic comedy, the film gently dramatizes and obfuscates some of the struggles of the post-war, post-traumatic condition. Nevertheless, one does not need to have pored over *Gravity’s Rainbow* to have some appreciation of the significance of World War Two in Pynchon’s counter-histories of the United States and how this link to past conflict therefore contributes to an intricately “decentred” engagement with 9/11 that frames the attacks in relation not only to the dotcom bubble but also to the whole “American Century”. It is therefore appropriate that the ambiguities of Sinatra’s career, as Chris Rojek argues, make it “one of the best expressions of the psychology and politics of achieved celebrity” in precisely that context.<sup>146</sup>

Given *Bleeding Edge*’s immersion in the spatio-temporal dynamics of New York, the intermedial connection to Brooklyn after the war provides, in addition,

<sup>146</sup> Rojek, *Sinatra*, 179.

a backdrop to the urban decline of subsequent years, followed by various surges in global and local immigration, brownstone real-estate mania, and the borough's current status as a paradigm case of hipsterfication. Across the East River from the "yups" of Maxine's Manhattan, clubs such as Saint Vitus regularly host black metal shows, including an emotional track-by-track performance of their debut album by the most recent incarnation of Mayhem in 2017 (it was released when the band had just one original member who was not dead, voluntarily exiled, or imprisoned).<sup>147</sup> And as if directly lifted from the pages of Pynchon's novel, black metal yoga classes take place at the Lucky 13 Saloon: "a bi-monthly sensory experience" advertised using the salutation "*Namaslay!*"<sup>148</sup>

As with Sinatra, there is nuance too in metal's relationship to war and authority, despite the glorifying and overtly fascistic impulses it may harbor. In many respects, black metal — the form most obviously associated with violence — arguably contains numerous elements at odds with any kind of rabid or chest-beating veneration of battle (as its use in yoga classes perhaps indicates). Much black metal is dominated by a sense of "abyssal" melancholy,<sup>149</sup> eerie solitude, and inward journeying, and the sub-genre has an underappreciated penchant for oddball, self-aware aesthetic choices. Even Mayhem's first EP, which showcases the fledgling band at their most raw and adolescent (sample song titles include "Necrolust" and "Chainsaw Gutsfuck"), sets an early precedent for black metal's eccentricity by opening with a curious electronic composition by Conrad Schnitzler of Tangerine Dream. It sounds like a video game marching beat programmed on a malfunctioning synthesizer with a touch of gamelan influence.<sup>150</sup> The metal genre more broadly has no monopoly on visions of *Götterdämmerung*, or, for that matter, on Luciferian revolt and Faustian bargains, and it has no exclusive relationship to violence per se. Hip hop, persuasively identi-

<sup>147</sup> See Kory Grow, "Mayhem's Long, Dark Road to Reviving a Black-Metal Classic", *Rolling Stone*, February 9, 2017. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/mayhems-long-dark-road-to-reviving-a-black-metal-classic-129097/>.

<sup>148</sup> See <http://www.lucky13saloon.com/events/2016/12/14/black-light-black-metal-yoga>.

<sup>149</sup> Scott Wilson, *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 6.

<sup>150</sup> Patterson explains the story behind this track in *Black Metal*, 135.

fied by Hänggi as “the liveliest” style of music in *Bleeding Edge* due to some striking instances of vocal performance that appear “unspoiled by cynicism”,<sup>151</sup> has its tragic body count (Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls are briefly mentioned in the novel) and its Gangsta aggression (aspects of which have been notably defended by Zadie Smith as “formal condition[s]” of hip hop’s “epic” mode).<sup>152</sup> For Attali, though, the fact that “death is everywhere in music,” death both “physical” and “institutional”, is undoubtedly cause for lament, even if the musician’s role vis-à-vis sacrifice and violence is an “exceedingly ambiguous” one.<sup>153</sup> However, while Attali is wedded to a utopian practice of “composition”, both visionary and vague, that might free music from these deathly ties, there are many ways of tempering this stance — from David Toop’s foundational assertion that sound is by definition a “sinister resonance”, an uncanny synthesis of “desire” and “dread”, to Slavoj Žižek’s claim that “libidinal investment” in the spectacle of certain metal performance styles (uncomfortably close to the Nazi rally for some) is precisely what “liberates” such elements from fascist “articulation” and suspends the “corrosion of media”.<sup>154</sup> In a similar vein, Stubberud of Mayhem has argued for a kind of socializing dimension to the music he has devoted himself to by describing it as “psychotherapy” for listeners.<sup>155</sup>

Thus, it is not necessarily a contradiction that a genre sometimes used to soundtrack actual combat also encompasses voices of dissent, disillusionment, and critique (or that such voices can be unwittingly repurposed for torture, as previously explored). Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs”, Judas Priest’s “Some Heads Are Gonna Roll”, Sepultura’s “Territory”, Metallica’s “One”, Napalm Death’s entire discography, the list

<sup>151</sup> Hänggi, “Sonic Fiction”, 138.

<sup>152</sup> Smith’s point primarily relates to “boasting” but is deployed here for its wider implications. See “The House That Hova Built”, *The New York Times Style Magazine*, September 2, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/t-magazine/the-house-that-hova-built.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 125.

<sup>154</sup> David Toop, *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), viii; *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, directed by Astra Taylor (Channel 4 DVD, 2013). In the documentary, Žižek uses the example of the German industrial metal band Rammstein, who performed on the 1998 Family Values tour.

<sup>155</sup> In “Los Bambinos del Satan.”

goes on.<sup>156</sup> These are some of the genre's set texts. Given metal's genuinely global diversification and reach, as well as the emphasis in *Bleeding Edge* on the historical processes that both precede and follow 9/11, it is also important to acknowledge the "constructively empowering" role that extreme forms of the genre have played for subcultural communities in conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria.<sup>157</sup> Bringing the analysis a little closer in, the strong tendency in anti-war metal songs to pit boots-on-the-ground soldiers against corrupt or incompetent officialdom, summed up by Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson via the old witticism "lions led by donkeys",<sup>158</sup> is actually not too far removed from the stress Sinatra places on the profundity of front-line experience and the integrity and pluck of "the little guy". Both contain at least the seeds of a critique of power and an awareness of human cost, even if both sometimes risk tipping over into varieties of what Rojek calls "oleaginous" sentiment.<sup>159</sup> The wider point then is that the two references continue to fold into each other. They cannot be satisfactorily or accurately contained in discrete categories.<sup>160</sup>

Upsetting what initially looks and sounds like a straightforward contrast therefore has a variety of implications. Interestingly, it also reveals how *Bleeding Edge* — despite its clear rejection of a certain brand of opportunistic conservative moralizing after 9/11 — still toys with anxieties about the corruptive influence of music.

<sup>156</sup> Track 1 on *Paranoid*, Vertigo, 1970; track 8 on *Defenders of the Faith*, Columbia Records, 1984; track 2 on *Chaos A.D.*, Roadrunner, 1993; track 4 on *...And Justice For All*, Elektra, 1988. Note that Greve and Pöhlmann briefly discuss the tradition of the anti-war metal song. See "Introduction", 27.

<sup>157</sup> Sam Grant, "Resistants, stimulants and weaponization: Extreme metal music and empowerment in the Iraqi and Syrian civil conflicts", *Metal Music Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 193.

<sup>158</sup> See Ben Wener, "Bruce Dickinson weighs in on 'The Trooper' ... and war", *The Orange County Register*, May 20, 2008. <https://www.ocregister.com/2008/05/20/bruce-dickinson-weighs-in-on-the-trooper-and-war/>.

<sup>159</sup> Rojek, *Sinatra*, 179.

<sup>160</sup> This is perhaps further compounded by the weird unconscious interplay that emerges between the story of Sinatra's birth and the blood-drenched costumery, self-harm, and "madness" of black metal. As so many of his biographers seem to relish lingering over, Sinatra was quite literally born bleeding after being injured by forceps and would later use make-up to cover the scarring on his cheek and neck. See, for example, Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan, *Sinatra: The Life* (London: Corgi Books, 2005), 28. Also note that a perforated left eardrum suffered as a result of the forced delivery led to his being classified "4-F" (unfit to serve), by the New Jersey Draft Board, a classification which was apparently a cover-up to disguise concerns about the young star's psychological profile. See Tom Kuntz and Phil Kuntz, *The Sinatra Files: The Secret FBI Dossier* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), 3–23.



Periodic outbreaks of Satanic panic aside, the augmented fourth now synonymous with metal is not generally thought to be truly hell-raising, but concerns persist about how such music might debase, desensitize, or incite the listener. The novel subtly demonstrates that these fears are not the sole preserve of organizations such as the PMRC. Jeffrey Severs, for instance, identifies a link between “Maxine’s paranoid narrative of Windust’s origins”, in which she imagines him “kidnapped as a child into the Montauk Project” and conditioned into a killer, and the shoot ‘em ups and martial arts enjoyed by her two boys, Ziggy and Otis. The novel, he argues, particularly when it comes to child/youth culture, is rife with examples of “sublimated violence”, hinting at a pervasive “preparation of [...] tinder that 9/11 threatens to ignite.”<sup>161</sup> However, Maxine at one point imagines Windust “in a more sympathetic-juvenile day” watching Bad Brains, a hugely influential hardcore punk/reggae band, at the 9:30 club in DC and parallels this to her own experiences at the Paradise Garage, a legendary New York discotheque. While she questions whether she is “sliding deeper into a sentimental idiocy attack”, the association between music and “*uncorrupted* youth” remains potent (254, my emphasis). Perhaps tellingly, though, when black metal enthusiast and anti-corporate mouthpiece Eric Outfield vanishes, we are told that he leaves “only an uneasy faith that he maybe still exists somewhere on the honourable side of the ledger” (433). A teenager “only a short time back” (333), Eric reappears towards the novel’s close, with a new gig managing a secret “rolling server

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<sup>161</sup> Jeffrey Severs, “‘A terrible inertia’: Thomas Pynchon’s Cold War History of 9/11 and the War on Terror in *Bleeding Edge*”, in *Reflecting 9/11: New Narratives in Literature, Television, Film and Theatre*, ed. Heather Pope and Victoria M. Bryan (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 89–90. Although Severs’ claim about “sublimated violence” in the novel is resonant, insightful, and difficult to dispute, there are some significant qualifiers here. It is important to note, for example, that *If Looks Could Kill*, a first-person shooter designed by Justin and Lucas that is narrated with a discernible sense of glee, “literally targets over-privileged yuppies, satirically attacking gentrification and the conspicuous consumption endemic to consumer capitalism.” See Jason Siegel, “Meatspace is Cyberspace: The Pynchonian Posthuman in *Bleeding Edge*”, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 4, no. 2 (2016): 19, <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.187>. Albert Rolls goes so far as to read the game in terms of “the younger generation’s resistance to the way things are”. See “Review of *Bleeding Edge*, by Thomas Pynchon”, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 2, no. 1 (2013): 5, <https://doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v2.1.51>. More broadly, then, connecting music to other examples of “sublimated violence” in popular culture does not (necessarily) imply that music and gaming belong to the same field or that the latter is a less complex aspect of the novel than the former.

farm” hidden in a truck. This murky episode hints at a new wave of cyber-resistance (a spectrum that encompasses the hacktivism of, say, a group like Anonymous and the hate-mongering online presence of Varg Vikernes) as well as seduction by moneyed and powerful backers. Eric chomps on a cigar, and his partner, Reg, has been temping for Microsoft (436–37).

Clearly, Pynchon is not suggesting that black metal automatically nurtures one’s inner predator, fascist, corporate vulture, or general scumbag (remembering here the famous claim in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that “[t]he Man has a branch office in each of our brains”).<sup>162</sup> At least not in any kind of direct or censorious way. The regulation of music, after all, is undeniably bound up with ideologies and market forces that the novel casts in an unwaveringly negative light. Neither does it mean that musical preference is a dependable, consistent key to the broader function and significance of Pynchon’s characters, although the parallel with Isaiah Two Four sets an intriguing precedent of sorts. The novel does, nonetheless, if we listen carefully, allow a conspiratorial, crow-on-the-shoulder sense of music’s influence on the individual and the collective to make itself felt, and takes the question of music’s karmic “ledger” very seriously.

Similarly, the Frank Sinatra allusion cannot credibly be framed as an expression of support for conservative family values or as a mocking swipe against tame, lounge-jazz squaredom. Once more, the musical unconscious provides rich layers of complexity and historical perspective. The so-called hysteria of the bobby-soxers was at one time considered subversive enough to be commented on in a report written for J. Edgar Hoover,<sup>163</sup> and Sinatra’s adoring fans have been strikingly compared to both covens of witches *and* the group of accusing girls who took part in the Salem witch trials.<sup>164</sup> Some of the weird erotic “magic” of music, its seemingly primordial capacity to captivate, possess, and override rational judgement, also appears to have survived in the novel’s neoliberal culturescape. The poignant B flat in “Time After Time”

<sup>162</sup> Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 712.

<sup>163</sup> Kuntz and Kuntz, *Sinatra Files*, 25.

<sup>164</sup> Most notably in Marion L. Starkey’s *Devil in Massachusetts* (1949). See Marion Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 122–123.

leaves Horst “helpless”, after all, just as Maxine is “seized in some post-disco swoon” by the bass line to Jamiroquai’s “Canned Heat” on an undercover visit to a strip club where she converses with Eric for the first time. She temporarily forgets her reason for being there and simply “succumbs” to dancing (222). The enchantment of mythic antiquity, it seems, which for Adorno encompasses both “Pan’s bewitching flute” and the disciplining arrangements of the “Orphic lyre”,<sup>165</sup> is perhaps not entirely incompatible with modern and contemporary technology. Indeed, as Steven Watts argues in *JFK and the Masculine Mystique* (2016), the “romantic élan” and “gliding” quality of Sinatra’s voice — apparently capable of charming both Horst, a “product of the U.S. Midwest, emotional as a grain elevator” (21), and thousands of teenage bobby-soxers — is bound up with the development of the condenser microphone, which allowed performers to sing more tenderly “while still reaching an audience.”<sup>166</sup>

These are fleeting expressions of the “magic” that has been chased and celebrated by popular and underground musical visionaries, condemned by moral arbiters and censors, fretted over by parents, priests, and philosophers, and manipulated (insofar as music can be dependably harnessed) by authoritarian strategists and marketing teams. And they point to how music in Pynchon can be understood as spookily befuddling and invasive — plugging into the “demonic nerve receptors” that at one point in the novel render Maxine unable to resist the advances of the murderous Windust — yet also liberating, cathartic, consolatory, and sensuous (258). They show how music, as Attali puts it, offers us “a complete journey through pleasure,” and how music functions in terms of “model[s] of amorous relations, [...] of relations with the other, of eternally recommenceable exaltation and appeasement”.<sup>167</sup> Most crucially, they are further manifestations of the “volatility” and “ambivalence” I have previously emphasized. Behind this “magic” lies a conception of music that reflects (if it is not rooted in) aspects of Adorno (the critique of the concept of taste, the insistence that music is both a Dionysian kicking out of the jams and an Apollonian

<sup>165</sup> Adorno, “Fetish”, 288.

<sup>166</sup> Steven Watts, *JFK and the Masculine Mystique: Sex and Power on the New Frontier* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016), 74.

<sup>167</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 143.

call to order), but which significantly departs from his unbending insistence that popular music under capitalism does little more than feed an “imitative assimilation to commodity models”.<sup>168</sup> In addition, “listening” to Pynchon’s fiction, tuning in to the sounds of historicity and futurity, vividly brings to life Attali’s core claim, as glossed by Shaviro, that “music is one of the foremost spheres in which the struggles, inventions, innovations, and mutations that determine the structure of society take place”. Or in other words, “[m]usic is not a mere part of what traditional Marxists called the ‘superstructure’”.<sup>169</sup> Yet committing to such a stance does not entail a wholesale subscription (on Pynchon’s part or mine) to Attali’s vision of an impending compositional utopia in which the commodity is superseded. This is more than just the benefit of world-weary, digi-hip, twenty-first century hindsight: the utopian impulses of Pynchon’s work are potent but they are also subject to constant renegotiation. Magic mingles with melancholy, celebration with the counting of costs. The process of analyzing *Bleeding Edge* and its musical unconscious reveals no signs of what Eric Drott calls the “vulgar *antimaterialism*” of Attali’s final flourish in *Noise*.<sup>170</sup>

## V. Outro: Welcome Aboard

While this analysis has concentrated on just four allusions — Britney, the Beach Boys, black metal, and Sinatra — the possibilities of further literary-musical detection are certainly not exhausted. The reference to “Korobushka”, for instance, the nineteenth-century Russian folk song that would go on to become the music for *Tetris* on the Nintendo Gameboy,<sup>171</sup> contributes to the novel’s positioning of 9/11 within the geopolitical framework of a Cold War that is not quite “over” in any straightforward

<sup>168</sup> Adorno, “Fetish”, 309.

<sup>169</sup> Shaviro, “Attali’s *Noise*.”

<sup>170</sup> Eric Drott, “Rereading Jacques Attali’s *Bruits*”, *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (2015): 753, my emphasis. Drott makes a striking case for situating Attali’s work on music and noise in the context of late seventies “political debates concerning the *Union de la gauche*” in France and stresses the “performative character” of his utopian projections vis-à-vis the “vulgar materialism espoused by the *Parti communiste*”.

<sup>171</sup> Note that *Tetris* is (anachronistically) alluded to in *Against the Day* (2006) via a Russian airship captain who dumps bricks on ground-level targets, “always in the four-block fragments which had become his signature”. See Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 123.

sense.<sup>172</sup> The puzzle game was designed by Alexey Pajitnov during his time at the Dorodnitsyn Computing Centre of the Soviet Academy of Sciences; the 8-bit “chip-tune” version of “Korobushka” known as “Theme A” was created by Hirokazu Tanaka in the year the Berlin wall came down.<sup>173</sup> When Maxine hears the “tinny electronic melody” in a semi-abandoned office complex, she asks herself if she has “entered some supernatural timewarp” (43). It is the sound of the past, as it were, specifically of the complex global tech relays that develop into the novel’s present, and a sound that uncannily heralds the fraught future just a little further beyond the End of History. The “thawing” that *Tetris* represents, in other words, carries an implicit reminder that some of the militant by-products of US-Soviet relations are alive and dangerous. The resonances of this reminder are perhaps enhanced by the fact that the original song evolved from a narrative poem by Nikolai Nekrasov — a tale of trade, romance, robbery, and murder. As “an anthem of nineties workplace fecklessness”, it is also the sound of a certain kind of complacency and disengagement (43). In light of Rachel Sykes’ compelling critique of US literary responses to 9/11 for a “failure [...] to be *quiet*”, which is “symptomatic of a kind of exceptionalism that dismisses the present’s continuity with the past and equates loudness with narratives of progress”, the sounds of *Bleeding Edge* and the musical unconscious — plaintive, sprightly, and hellish alike — open up a rather different way of thinking about the critical value of certain “noisy” fictions.<sup>174</sup>

To further demonstrate the scope of these openings, the same approach used to explore the four previous examples could also be applied to, say, Pynchon’s allusion to the rappers’ feud between Jay-Z and Nas (282). Given my discussion of metal, a genre that is at the very least partly tied to white privilege, the specific reference to “The World is Yours” (1994) by Nas provides, via his metaphor-rich flow and bone-dry

<sup>172</sup> Given Pynchon’s stint in the navy and his role as a technical writer for Boeing, Severs examines the novel “as Pynchon’s personal post-9/11 rumination on the ongoing relevance to his fictional project of his personal involvement in the Cold War”. See “A terrible inertia”, 77–78.

<sup>173</sup> See <https://tetris.com/article/9/the-history-of-the-tetris-theme-music>.

<sup>174</sup> Rachel Sykes, “All that Howling Space: ‘9/11’ and the Aesthetic of Noise in Contemporary American Fiction”, *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st Century Writings* 4, no. 1: 17–18, my emphasis. <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/c21.2>.

punning, an alternative yet complementary take on the notion of infernal forces. “Dwellin’ in the Rotten Apple, you get tackled”, he raps, with the whole system of New York City life described as the “devil’s lasso”. Music’s relationship to political authority and economy, undoubtedly a key issue for Pynchon, is also prominent here, as suggested by the lines before the track’s first chorus: “I’m out for presidents to represent me/I’m out for dead presidents to represent me”.<sup>175</sup> Both rappers were notably included on the White House playlist in the period during which *Bleeding Edge* was written and published, and Jay-Z was an active supporter of Barack Obama throughout his two campaigns.<sup>176</sup> Obama also imitated the brush-brush movement popularized by the video for Jay-Z’s “Dirt Off Your Shoulder” when responding to comments by Hilary Clinton during the Democratic primaries (**Figure 6**).<sup>177</sup> The scandalous violence that took place in Norway is not required for the notion of art bleeding into reality to appear credible. The most appropriate coda to this analysis, however, comes from details that have already surfaced from the musical unconscious — Maxine’s



**Figure 6:** Obama brushes off the dirt, April 17, 2008 (CNN footage).

<sup>175</sup> Track 4 on *Illmatic*, Columbia Records, 1994.

<sup>176</sup> See references to Nas, Jay-Z, and the president’s “rap palate” in Jann S. Wenner, “Obama in Command”, *Rolling Stone*, October 14, 2010. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/obama-in-command-the-rolling-stone-interview-188620/>.

<sup>177</sup> Track 6 on *The Black Album*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2003. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz\\_-VaTHpc8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz_-VaTHpc8).

first encounter with Reg on a cruise holiday, shortly after her break-up with Horst, and Pynchon's liner notes for Lotion.

The cruise episode in *Bleeding Edge* is another instance of a nautical set piece in Pynchon's fiction, with each of his novels featuring boats and journeys across water of various kinds (civilian, military, and folkloric). The sequence characteristically combines elements of surreal whimsy (the two of them are booked on a trip organized by the American Borderline Personality Disorder Association) with an unsettling awareness of the bloody past. The ship is bound for the point at which Haiti and the Dominican Republic meet in Manzanillo Bay, close to one of Columbus' landing spots and the site of the 1937 "Perejil Massacre", also known as *el corte* (15–16).<sup>178</sup> Both countries have been occupied by the US during the twentieth century. Amidst these comic and politically-charged details of Maxine's backstory, Pynchon alludes to the theme from *The Love Boat* TV show (1977–1986) via a reference to "exciting and new" romance — the first lines of the lounge-disco number sung by Jack Jones.<sup>179</sup> It is surely revealing that Pynchon is returning here to pop-cultural material first expounded upon in the liner notes for the CD and vinyl versions of *Nobody's Cool*. Lotion's debut album is called *Full Isaac* (named after the barman of the S. S. Pacific Princess in *The Love Boat*),<sup>180</sup> and Pynchon uses this as a prompt for conceptualising the band's "creative itinerary". Beneath the "edge-of-chaos guitar passages", he claims, "may also be detected the weird jiving sense of humor of a cruise combo". But this claim comes with a significant qualification. "If it's a cruse gig," he writes, "it sure runs through peculiar waters,"

full of undetonated mines from the cultural disputes that began in the Sixties, unexplained lights now and then from just over the horizon, stowaways who sneak past security and meddle with the amps causing them to emit strange Rays, unannounced calls at ports that seem almost like cities we have been to, though not quite, cityscapes that all converge to New York in some form, which is after all where these guys are from.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>178</sup> See Steeve Coupeau, *The History of Haiti* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 82–83.

<sup>179</sup> Released as a single in 1979 on MGM/Polydor.

<sup>180</sup> Lotion, *Full Isaac*, spinArt, 1994.

<sup>181</sup> Pynchon, liner notes.

In many respects, Pynchon's description of *Nobody's Cool* provides a fitting metaphor for his own career. More precisely, it helps to summarize the role of music in *Bleeding Edge* and the critical potential of reading and listening in tandem. The danger, especially on a ship, is that music may offer only the false, destructive promises of the sirens' song — briefly referenced by Attali to embellish his early "hypothesis of music as a simulacrum of sacrifice", with Odysseus cast in the role of symbolic "scapegoat",<sup>182</sup> and more famously interpreted by Adorno and Horkheimer as an allegory for "the entanglement of myth, domination, and labor."<sup>183</sup> (*The Love Boat*, in fact, as sung by Jones, alluringly "promises something for everyone.") We nevertheless encounter plenty of "weird jiving humor" in the face of this peril and also a profound sense of something else "trying to find a pathway through to us" — a "something" I have interpreted as both historical understanding and prophetic/prophetic insight, intimately and consistently bound up with both the resistance to and the expression of power. Something that continues to bleed through to "our own corrupted and perilous day, when everybody's heard everything and knows more than they wish they did."<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 29.

<sup>183</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; London and New York: Verso, 1997), 36.

<sup>184</sup> Pynchon, liner notes. An alternative way of putting this comes from Michael Chanan, paraphrasing parts of a pamphlet written by the American composer Elie Siegmeister in the 1930s. "[C]apitalism has created the most magnificent apparatus for the production, distribution and consumption of music that the world has ever seen. Yet this apparatus is so riddled with contradictions [...] that it continues to negate its own potentialities. Nevertheless, music somehow continually manages to escape this negation, to shake off the bonds of commercialization and escape to freedom: because it has its own inner resources for overcoming the contradictions of this, our disturbed and disturbing reality." See *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and its Effects on Music* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 178.



## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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